



A FEMINIST APPROACH TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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It is a critical time for our planet. The foreboding weight of the effect of anthropogenic climate change is “a poignant reminder of the risks we face if we do not act swiftly and with purpose” (GSDR, xiii). If there is no change in development strategies in the coming years, the way we see the world is going to change drastically. Hans Von Storch, a known climate scientist, stated, “An understanding of climate history is important to the understanding of the issue present today.” Climate change can easily be traced back to non-sustainable development issues created by the beginning of the Industrial Revolution as early as 1880. From 1880 to 2012, the global temperature has risen an average of 0.85°C (AR5 synthesis report). This may seem like a small increase, but in reality, it is not. This small increase has caused violent hurricanes, frequent and intense wildfires, prolonged droughts, and extreme flooding. These severe natural disasters used to be far and few between, but now the world must prepare for the worst consistently. The increase in temperature exacerbates these climate hazards, leaving everyone at risk (although the poor are affected disproportionately because of lack of access to resources), no matter how prepared they may be. If the current temperature increase is doubled, we arrive at the temperature that in 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released as the temperature that will prove to have serious, irreversible consequences, 1.5°C . The IPCC special report detailed the damage that could be done to key, diverse ecosystems such as the Amazon Rainforest, the Arctic Circle, and coral reefs around the world. With this temperature increase of 1.5°C , it is estimated that 70-90% of coral reefs will be

destroyed, and any higher will prove to be disastrous with over 99% destruction (IPCC). It also explained that global net human emissions of CO₂ need to decrease by 45% before the year 2030 and continue decreasing until reaching a net zero by 2050. If this single necessity is not met, then the results will be disastrous. If massive changes are not made to land, energy, transport, and city industries, then the world is facing what could be described as the apocalypse. Hundreds of fragile ecosystems, which humans as a species depend on, will collapse, leaving us with depleting resources and no way to replenish or recreate them. This is rapidly becoming a humanitarian crisis rooted in non-sustainable development practices that have continued without remorse for years.

Much of this environmental stress is felt strongly by rural communities, and when they try to remedy their situation by having a family member migrate to the city to earn an income, the family dynamic is shifted. Often, it is the man traveling because he will face less (or none at all) gender discrimination. This could either enhance the economic situation of the rural women or exacerbate their poverty, depending on the gender roles in their community (Brown, 34).

While the number of climate migrants is not exact, various analysts have predicted there to be over 200 million people displaced by issues affected by climate processes, events, and climate-affected drivers (such as agricultural disruption, coastal flooding, and resource-driven wars, respectively) by the year 2050 (Brown, 9). Disasters such as this are only *some* examples of events that will affect the world's poor populations the hardest. "...it is likely that the burden

of providing for climate migrants will be borne by the poorest countries – those least responsible for emissions of greenhouse gases” (Brown, 9). The countries in the Global South are least responsible for the emissions of greenhouse gases, but they bear the weight because of exported labor from the Global North. They *also* have the added responsibility of providing for climate migrants, because the Global South is affected by it more than the Global North. In the North, because of their access to resources, money, and technologies to provide comfort (properly insulated homes to stay comfortable, imported resources, what else?), people can largely go about their business as usual and not immediately see the effects as much as countries in the Global South do. Many underdeveloped countries in the Global South have increased production for developed countries in the Global North in recent decades, simply because the labor can be exported. The consequence of this is that the carbon footprint can be displaced or transferred from one country to the next. The countries producing the goods tend to bear the weight of the carbon, land, and water footprints that are left on the world, and the consumers get off relatively guilt-free (Hoekstra). When the temperature increases even slightly, the situation becomes a slippery slope, leading to even greater inequalities in territories of difference, but especially between the domain of the Global North and South. In addition to this, the world’s poor will be the most severely impacted because of the disproportionate effect climate events have on their livelihoods and security (Greek Chairmanship,1). Women, comprising 70% of the world’s poor (Visvanathan, 2011), are going to be struggling even more to care for their families and

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communities – which makes climate change and gender much more involved than one might think. As climate change depletes the natural resources of the surrounding environment, a “woman’s job” becomes much more difficult. Women are often tasked with gathering wood, food, and water for their families, and the depletion of resources requires them to travel farther for these necessities. Not only that, but it reduces access to educational opportunities, as daughters will often drop out of school to help their mothers, while sons will continue their education to ensure that they can provide for their future family in other ways. Natural disasters such as hurricanes also force many people to lose their livelihoods. When this happens to poor women, they are faced with the threat of slipping even further into the poverty stricken life they must live, as well as falling further into marginalization and inequality that they face simply for being a woman (Visvanathan, 2011). These issues all need to be addressed, and the current policies are not doing enough for the scope that climate change related issues cover.

Climate change has an impact on many areas, and ecofeminism successfully navigates and addresses many of those areas. Science and development, while not normally categorized as such, are patriarchal institutions that women struggle to thrive in, despite their heavy and necessary involvement in both areas. In the past, these areas have been important to the study and understanding of climate change, but it is time for the lens to shift. Greta Gaard, one of the most influential ecofeminist scholars, writes “...climate change and first world overconsumption are produced by masculinist ideology, and will not be solved by masculinist techno-science

approaches” (Gaard, 20). The solutions that include addressing issues that rise from the ideologies of exploitation, economic domination, and colonialism – which are often the issues that the LGBTQ and feminist communities rally around – provide a new lens of analysis for development strategies. An ecological and feminist approach (ecofeminist, if you will), will transform the world’s analysis and solutions to climate change in ways that are more inclusive, transformative, and environmentally friendly than prior approaches. The ecofeminist movement is crucial to development strategies of today because of its interdisciplinary and analytical approach to sustainable development practices that will ensure the success of future generations.

The fight against climate change and the fight for the environment are inherently female-driven, with women in the Global North being very conscientious when it comes to dealing with their contribution and effect on climate change (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Young women also have higher levels of engagement with climate change movements and feel more responsibility towards the environment than men. Educated, female citizens are much more likely to encourage involvement among peers, as “there is a positive relationship between education and citizen engagement in supporting climate change policies” (Salehi, et. Al, 2015). So, if women have access to the tools they require, such as education, leadership roles, and territories where their voices can be heard, climate change strategies can be amended to be more inclusive. Women then would have the ability to ensure their own safety because they would have a voice in creating the policies that will affect them so disproportionately. “Women are

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indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather it is a result of inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty” (Gaard, 23). Women all around the world have different needs and wants, and those need to be addressed in different ways. This means that cultural relativism needs to be applied to feminism. For example, many Afghan women see the burqa as a “liberating invention because it [enables] women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men” (Abu-Lughod, 91). Afghan women may want to observe their traditional religions and they may feel like they are not being oppressed. Western feminists can have a hard time understanding facts such as this because their life is getting better and improving in ways they need, but that does not mean that the same methods are going to work in every area of the world. Just as “traditional” feminism and women’s needs are different around the world, environmental solutions and responses need to be formed based on the surroundings and needs of the community.

Women in the Global North typically have access to more freedoms such as education, social and political voice, and money than women in the Global South. Seema Arora-Jonsson, a Swedish feminist scholar, has chosen to compare two countries that have adopted gender-responsive policies: Sweden and India. Sweden recognizes that women are “especially vulnerable to climate effects because of poverty, conflicts, lack of gender and social equality,

environmental degradation, and lack of food” (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). India recognizes it as well, but in a slightly different, more urgent, way, ““The impacts of climate change could prove particularly severe for women. With climate change there would be increasing scarcity of water, reductions in yields of forest biomass, and increased risks to human health with children, women and the elderly in a household becoming the most vulnerable...special attention should be paid to the aspects of gender” (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). It is important to pay attention to the language used here so we can understand that *different countries have different needs*. While both of the policy amendments place specific emphasis on the vulnerability of women, there is an emphasis on the lack of gender and social inequalities in Sweden, and a lack of natural resources (water, forest biomass, etc.) available to women in India. These are very different areas that are of high importance to each country, but for one it is the mental wellbeing (equality) and the other is the physical.

Many countries can be compared in a similar fashion as this, and the Global North will always have placed more emphasis on social inequalities than on basic needs. With the Global South making up a large percentage of the world’s poor, placing an emphasis on access to basic needs over social inequalities is logical. However, what isn’t logical is that many of these issues stem from climate events that are caused by the massive amount of carbon emissions the Global North is responsible for. This means that “women and children in poverty are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, despite their disproportionately low contribution to

the problem” (Gaard, 2015). There are many strategies suggesting that the Global South is to blame because of their large population. The Global South, however, has 80% of the world population while contributing only 20% of the world’s carbon emissions (Gaard, 2015). In 2015, politicians realized this fact, and took action. The UNFCCC held the Conference of Parties 21 (COP21), where 175 world leaders signed the Paris Agreement, agreeing to “accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable, low-carbon future” (UNFCCC). This meant that developing nations, who contribute less than 2% of GHGs and yet suffer all the same consequences (Satgar, 2018), get enhanced support from developed nations, to help speed up the process of fixing centuries of mistakes. This support is classified as the Declaration of the Right to Development (COP21). It emphasizes the idea that climate change does not discriminate and that some countries and vulnerable people are suffering and paying the price for a crime they did not commit. During a panel at COP21, Elizabeth Mpofu said that climate change diverts resources from crucial public services such as health, education, and agrarian support. This creates a spiral of vulnerability that is difficult to get out of for many people, so assistance was created for the developing countries through the Paris Agreement. The United Nations has created several Sustainable Development Goals to work on through the years. Tackling the climate change issue is goal number 13. Many of these goals, not numbered in any particular order, are intertwined with one another, as they are all for the greater good of humanity. Unfortunately, there are many countries that are negatively affected by climate change that

simply do not have the funds to combat it. For example, Burundi, Chad, and Sudan were among the world's most displaced communities in 2015 (UN Environment, 2019). This has not improved much. In Burundi, the country's needs for wood is exceeding their supply, "hasten[ing] their soil erosion and imperil[ing] their food security" (UN Environment, 2019). In Sudan, the combination of poor infrastructure, displacement of thousands of people, refugee settlements, and environmental degradation has placed massive pressure on the land, threatening food security and health to the country and its surrounding area. Security issues such as these are a direct result of years of fighting over resources. Not being able to provide enough basic necessities for their people, these countries end up falling into civil wars that last for years on end. The Paris Agreement helps with this, by requiring developed countries to aid smaller, developing countries that are struggling in this fashion. The Paris Agreement can serve three different goals: climate change (13), poverty eradication (1), and reduced income inequality (10). Improving any one of these goals will automatically improve the other two. A study shows that "a full implementation of emission reduction contributions (stated in the Paris Agreement) is projected to reduce poverty by 2030" (Campagnolo, et. Al, 2017). Political leaders have to think about how their economies will be affected, and how this in turn will affect their people. Many underdeveloped countries do not have the funds to approve climate change measures, which is why in COP21, developing nations get enhanced support.

Despite this evidence of inequality and even the existence of a plan to fix it, the Global North continues to place blame on the South, arguing for cost-effective family planning methods distributed among poor communities to reduce the carbon emissions they are responsible for. None of these solutions, however, suggest the Global North cutting back on its overconsumption of the planet's resources. This "population control" method become increasingly popular among nations when it is realized that the climate change related disasters will create climate migrants and refugees looking for safety and shelter in the Global North, threatening the "disproportionate wealth (i.e. 'security') of the North" (Gaard, 2015). While the North argues and pushes the narrative of needing population control because the planet is overrun by impoverished people who don't have access to birth control or sexual education, the South bears the brunt of their consequences. From an ecofeminist perspective, there are commonalities between climate justice and reproductive justice, but the strategies that need to be implemented in the Global North or South look very different from each other.

When gender responsive actions are being taken, there should be a process that will substantially help to overcome historical gender biases in order for women to truly engage and benefit from those actions (Global Gender Office). Creating policies that fit in this category is a goal of the Global Gender and Climate Alliance. This alliance was created by WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization), IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), UNEP (United Nations Environment Program), and UNDP (United Nations

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Development Program) to create a powerful partnership of groups to open up the space for talking about gender in relation to climate change in the context of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) (WEDO). This organization has created the Global Gender-Response Climate Change Program to ensure that women have gender responsive policies in their favor. The program involves the creation of a Women Delegates Fund to support women from the Global South and encourage them to participate in their national delegations, as well as has have increased women's participation and leadership in UN climate negotiations (WEDO). This is so important to see changes in participation among women, but also that it is specifically in the Global South. These women are often underprivileged and thought of as much less by their communities than many women in the Global North. Another goal of this program is to integrate gender equality issues and perspectives into the new climate agreement as well as across climate change decision making, policies, and planning (WEDO). This is significant because it is allowing women to have a voice in these policies that are affecting them, as well. The policies also may overlook many facts and figures, such as the fact that women make up a majority of poverty-stricken people. Being able to have a voice allows women to speak up about issues that are directly affecting them.

Women need to be included in the conversation surrounding climate justice. When they first started to be included in November of 1991, it was through the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) at the World's Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet. At

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this conference, ecofeminists pushed for new ideas to be considered that included women in the conversation, as they had valuable contributions that were not based in reforming the then-current (and ineffective) policies. For example, an ecofeminist analysis of “environmental degradation as rooted in military/industrial/capitalist economics” was one of the “most transformative proposals” (Gaard, 2015) but it was ignored in the following year’s report. For many years to come, the root causes of the climate crisis were not addressed. While women were invited to the conversation, they were not taken seriously and actually included by UN officials. This ignited a fire that inspired women to push for true participation in the years to come.

When women in the Global South were mentioned in conferences and meetings, it was a discussion surrounding their “material need for food security and productive agricultural land, forest resources, clean water, and sanitation” (Gaard, 2015). Women were depicted as victims of climate justice rather than being included in the conversation in analyzing the root causes and attempting to fix it. In 2009, the House of Representatives “recognized the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and the efforts of women globally to address climate change” (Arora-Jonsson, 2010). This resolution encouraged developing policies to be more gender-responsive and inclusive in their frameworks. While women are *victims* of climate change, they are also the unsung *heroines* of climate change, developing a discourse surrounding development and analysis that did not previously exist within the space. “The shift from *women*

as individuals to gender as a system, structuring power relations has been an important development in feminist responses to climate change” (Gaard, 2015).

Since this shift in participation, many countries have adapted gender-responsive policies in their climate change response strategies. While these strategies are making great strides, they are not completely reformative. Women in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region have unique skills in regard to local knowledge, agents of social change, and other skills necessary to the success of sustainable climate change adaptation (Nyahunda, et. Al, 2019). For example, while the policies in the SADC regions aim to be more inclusive, it is not in the exhaustive list of each policy – only some, and only in some countries. In Zimbabwe, the policies acknowledge the plight of women and expresses interest in their vulnerability; in Namibia the policy is not clear on *how* women can participate in the creation, integration, and reform of the policies; and in Zambia while the policy is insistent on improving the participation of women, youth, the elderly, people living with disabilities, and children in climate change programs, it does not recognize the vulnerabilities of these groups and does not make their roles clear (Nyahunda, et. Al, 2019). If society is to achieve the goal of reducing carbon emissions, this is a good first step, but it should have been made many years ago.

Many women have taken on huge leadership roles over the years and created large, inspiring environmental movements and policies that push for the recognition of the work that needs to be done in light of the climate change crisis. Representative Ocasio-Cortez has taken on the

responsibility of pushing the US to recognize the scale of the climate crisis in introducing the Green New Deal. It is very important that the US is acknowledging this plan in the wake of pulling out of the Paris Agreement in 2017, announcing that the powerful country would cease all participation on climate change mitigation. “More than just solar panels and wind turbines, this resolution establishes the foundation for a successful and sustainable 21st century economy” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019). The environmental and economic plan that Representative Ocasio-Cortez is leading is creating a nonbinding resolution – so it is only telling the House that there are things that should be done in the coming years. Some things to note that are included in the Green New Deal is an emphasis on the massive increase in renewable energy production (wind and solar) and the goal that the US should be carbon neutral in 10 years. In an interview with NPR, Representative Ocasio-Cortez says that this huge undertaking is an investment in the future, not a cost for the government. She emphasizes that it is “completely wrong to point fingers at developing nations” when the US holds a disproportionate responsibility for the problem. She is also adamant on making the point that the economy will grow because of this investment, explaining that “for every \$1 spent on infrastructure, we get \$6 back” (NPR). She insists that these goals that have been set to drastically cut carbon emissions will create jobs and boost the economy, “while paying special attention to groups like the poor, disabled, and minority communities that might be disproportionately affected by massive economic transitions like those the Green New Deal calls for” (Kurtzleben, 2019). The young representative has applied

the ecofeminist theory to this Green New Deal without stating outright; she has placed an emphasis on watching out for those that this proposal will affect disproportionately and has called for action from everyday people to organize and make their opinions and presence known to their officials. She cannot do this alone, and the wide spectrum of debate on the topic of climate justice means the public needs to play a large role. With this call to action, many individuals and organizations immediately got to work.

The Feminist Agenda for a Green New Deal is a global coalition of individuals and organizations that are working towards justice for all areas that climate change will affect. This intersectional approach to climate change justice provides a multi-dimensional view of the issues that climate change affects. The principles that are highlighted on the document describe actions that individuals, communities, and organizations can take to move forward. The collective welcomes the opportunity that Representative Ocasio-Cortez has given them, committing to addressing the root causes by showing “coherence across policy sectors, from trade to military spending to development.” By working together in a multilateral way, the coalition will be able to push their 10 goals that are crucial to the success of policies such as the Green New Deal in the future. One of the most important goals that is touched upon in the document is to “ensure democratically controlled, community-led solutions.” As an inspiration of this exact goal, we can look to Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan democratic and environmental activist whose drive and passion started the Green Belt Movement, which is still active today.

Maathai began her journey with the Green Belt Movement when the Kenyan government was very repressive, attempting to focus on industrializing the country – meaning they were creating space for cash crops such as coffee and cocoa, and clearing forest lands to use as fields for livestock (Dater, 2008). Because of the political corruption following its postcolonial independence, “Kenya experienced extreme deforestation, soil erosion, and malnutrition”, which Maathai clearly saw as an issue that needed addressing, and aspired to work with “primarily poor, rural women [mobilizing them] around environmental and civic engagement campaigns” (Hunt, 2014). With the resources available to her community drastically reduced, Maathai began to engage women in finding the connection between environmental justice and political change, and began planting trees with other women in her community (Hunt, 2014). In doing this, they were creating a way for women in their community to access natural resources easily, while also uniting themselves along the ecofeminist idea of critiquing the oppressions that affected the environment and the lives of women around the world. This activism evolved into much more than just planting trees, and soon the grassroots organizers were calling for true democracy in Kenya, further empowering the women and their community.

Wangari Maathai dedicated her life to fighting for the environment, human rights, and democracy in Kenya. Her work parallels the ideas that not everyone is affected in the same way by political struggles, development, and productivity that are outlined in the beginning of Vandana Shiva’s book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*. She writes about

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the Indian woman's connection to the Earth and struggle to challenge the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation, and instead tries to reinforce the idea that it is a living force that supports life (Shiva, xv). In India, the government often overlooks the needs of women, peasants, and tribals and pushes for economic growth, which drains natural resources from those who need it the most. Women end up bearing the costs and reaping none of the benefits (Shiva, 2), similar to the ideas that Representative Ocasio-Cortez expresses in her interview with NPR. The people are already paying for the actions of large corporations (by paying for the clean-up of the pollution they are responsible for), but they see none of the benefits. These political struggles, seen around the world, are rooted in ecology and are "an immediate threat to the options for survival for the vast majority of the people" (Shiva, 8). Industrially advanced countries don't see it this way, because their struggles are focused on short term production and over consumption.

This work is so important to the understanding of ecofeminism because it further emphasizes that There is a difference in the definition of poverty to the Global North versus the Global South. The Global South has less developed and less industrialized countries that are playing "catch-up" with the quickly advancing countries of the Global North. These advanced countries push manufactured items more than they would be in other parts of the world. If a community has anything man-made, meaning commercially produced food, concrete housing materials, and synthetic clothing, then they are not considered to be impoverished to industrialized nations.

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However, if a community was to utilize the natural resources around them and eat farmed food such as millets, live in self-built natural housing, and wear handmade clothing of natural fibers, then they are considered to be impoverished (Shiva, 9), or less fortunate than those who can afford to have these unnatural, factory-made, mass-produced items. Subsistence living such as this is not equal to poverty, although many industrialized nations in the Global North may see it as such. The lessons we can learn from Shiva's work is that women are skilled in adapting to "a changing climate and can articulate what they need to secure and sustain their livelihoods more effectively. Local strategies for adapting to climate change provide valuable lessons"

(Visvanathan, 2011). Women in the Global South do not need to play "catch-up" with the Global North, they need to be heard and listened to when voicing their concerns and ideas about the situation that directly affects them.

Women like Shiva and Maathai have inspired many others over the years, and it can be seen in today's climate movements. Young women like Greta Thunberg and Varshini Prakash are creating and pushing climate change movements like Fridays for Future and the Sunrise Movement. Thunberg became a global icon when she said, "Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is" (Van Sant, 2019). These words have inspired so many people to take action. The idea that a sixteen-year-old

can be so passionate about a future that may not be promised to her is moving. Fridays For Future became Thunberg's protest, when she and other activists began a school strike for climate. Beginning in September of 2018, these young activists have demanded for urgent action on the climate crisis, sparking an international awakening that united climate activists around the world. The Sunrise movement, founded by Varshini Prakash in 2017, is doing something similar, "building an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and wellbeing of all people" (Sunrise Movement). They are inspiring the youth of today to look forward to the future, to fight for and create a country that listens to its people, not wealthy, greedy oil and gas executives, by creating connections that span the thousands of miles across the United States.

These young women struggle to be recognized as true, legitimate climate change leaders because of their age and their utilization of grassroots organization, but "the real power, however, will lie outside the UN...[with the young women who] are the reason climate holds a sense of urgency in U.S. media and politics like never before" (Dolan, 2019). People pay attention to these young women that are speaking out in public, not behind closed doors at UN conferences and negotiations. We feel as though these powerfully dressed people aren't doing *enough* almost, that they don't seem to be activists that are radical enough for us. But these

women? They are rallying hundreds, thousands of people up to voice their opinions. They are the “movers and shakers” (Dolan, 2019) of the future.

Caring about the environment has always been seen as an inherently female trait for years because of women’s close relationship and connection to the earth. This makes the men in charge reject many of the ideas, but after years of fighting there is finally the opportunity to shed some very public light on the ideas and power that women hold. Women like Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva have dedicated their lives to giving women a voice, an opportunity to speak up for the needs they have, and policymakers have begun to listen. There are inequalities in this world that require separate attention, and there are intricacies and connections to many of the problems we face. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are ways to use the connections we find to change the development strategies and practices to ensure the success of future generations.

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