

Climate Justice, Gender, and Intersectionality

by Patricia E. Perkins

esperk@yorku.ca

Professor, Faculty of Environmental Studies,
York University, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada

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Centre for Climate Justice, Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland

Abstract: Women are generally more vulnerable than men to environmental disasters and extreme weather events due to four main factors, which are related to women's gendered roles in society: women are economically disadvantaged in comparison to men and are more likely to live in poverty; sexual and reproductive health and physical demands on their bodies during pregnancy, child-bearing and rearing, and menopause put them at special risk; their lives tend to be longer and they spend more time as seniors / widows, with resulting economic and health implications; and their social options are restricted so that they often fill paid and unpaid roles related to physical and emotional caring that put them at special risk of environmental injustice. This means that environmental and climate injustice are gendered in both rich and poor countries, and this can be manifested in a variety of ways: housing, transportation, food insecurity, stress, mental illness, disability, heat exposure, interruptions of electricity and water services, violence against women, partner and elder violence, toxic exposure, health vulnerability, worker safety, political voice/agency/leadership, and many others. Gender also intersects with other categories of vulnerability such as ethnicity, 'race,' sexuality, dis/ability, etc. to heighten climate risk and injustice. The gendered effects of extreme weather events are often not disaggregated in government statistics and research literature, and an explicit gender focus, including attention to the access of women and marginalized people to participation in climate policy setting, has been minimal. Both at the local level and globally, climate change adaptation and response initiatives can downplay or suppress democratic, equity-enhancing politics.

This chapter examines climate justice issues through an intersectional gender lens, to identify major themes, knowledge gaps, and priorities for action. It considers *distributive* justice (work, money, resource access) as well as *procedural* justice (decision-making, leadership, political agency), *intersectional* justice (the compounding effects of gender, sexual difference, 'race,' indigeneity, poverty, ill-health, and other potential vulnerabilities), and *intergenerational* justice (the implications of climate vulnerabilities for future descendants) in providing a dynamic view of how climate change affects people differentially over space and time, and what they are able to do about it. The chapter highlights initiatives aimed at building on and prioritizing gender justice to organize for local and global climate justice. Gender justice is a fundamental component of climate justice, and gender

justice organizing, activism, techniques and lessons can help show the path to climate justice more generally.

Keywords: gender, women, intersectionality, climate change, water, climate vulnerability, political agency, gender violence

AUTHOR BIO: Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins is a Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto where she teaches ecological economics, community economic development, climate justice, and critical interdisciplinary research design. Her research focuses on feminist ecological economics, climate justice, and participatory governance. She directed international research projects on community-based watershed organizing in Brazil and Canada (2002 - 2008; <http://www.yorku.ca/siswater/>) and on climate justice and equity in watershed management with partners in Mozambique, South Africa and Kenya (2010 – 2012; <http://ccaa.iris.yorku.ca/>). She is the editor of Water and Climate Change in Africa: Challenges and Community Initiatives in Durban, Maputo and Nairobi (London/New York: Routledge/Earthscan, 2013) and the author of many articles, book chapters and other publications. She is an editor of the journal Ecological Economics. Previously, she taught economics at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, and served as an environmental policy advisor with the Ontario government. She holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Toronto.

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While climate change is often seen as an ‘Anthropocene’ or human species-induced problem, climate change affects different people differently, and certain humans are more responsible than others for causing it; some even benefit from climate change. Furthermore, some people have much greater ability to influence climate change policies than others do. These differences – which together underlie *distributive* and *procedural* climate injustices -- are deeply gendered¹ everywhere in the world; denying or disregarding this reality both heightens long-standing injustices and hampers efforts to address climate change (Moosa and Tuana 2014; Macgregor 2017; Buckingham and Kulcur 2017; Tschakert and Machado 2012). There are other aspects of climate justice which also are gendered: *intergenerational justice* (the rights of those who are not yet born to inherit a liveable Earth, and the responsibilities of people who are alive now for the future impacts of current decisions and consumption which will have long-term impacts on those not yet born), *interspecies justice* (consideration for non-human species and for protecting biodiversity), and *corrective, retributive, or restorative justice* (fairness in the measures taken to address unjust situations).

The ethical argument for emphasizing gender in climate justice is that women make up half of humankind, so the well-documented disproportional impacts of climate change on women must be addressed as an urgent matter of equity. Moreover, since women have large biological and cultural roles in human reproduction and livelihood production, even small gender-linked differentials have huge impacts on humanity as a whole. Gender is the most crucial category of climate injustice. This chapter briefly summarizes why an intersectional gender perspective on all types of climate justice is not only ethically vital, but also efficient, strategic, theoretically fundamental, and inspiring.

The effects of climate change are gendered

In all countries, women on average tend to be less educated, poorer, less mobile, and more long-lived than men (Röhr et al. 2010; Nagel 2015:5) – all risk factors for vulnerability to climate change (Terry 2009; Alston and Whittenbury 2013; Weiss 2012). In many countries, agriculture and food production, cooking, care for children and other family/community members, and obtaining water for the household are almost exclusively women’s responsibilities, due to gendered social roles. Climate change increases the (usually unpaid) work associated with these responsibilities. Sometimes girls must leave school to do this extra work, or women are forced to switch away from paid work, which further reduces their earning

¹ Gender is the range of characteristics, which differentiate between masculinity and femininity, including biological sex or physical appearance, sex-based social structures and roles, and culturally formed gender identity. When something is ‘gendered,’ it reflects or involves gender differences, prejudices, or roles.

potential, incomes, and relative economic position (Denton 2002; UNDP 2009; Nagel 2015:34-39; Rodenberg 2009; Habtezion 2013). So gendered climate vulnerability involves reinforcing feedbacks that increase its impacts over time and over generations.

Disasters such as floods, droughts, wildfires and other extreme events triggered by climate change often cause surges in gender-based violence (Enarson 2012; Dunn 2009; IFRC 2007). Women and children are disproportionately forced to migrate because of such extreme events, and they are more at-risk (Roberts 2009; Black 2016: 174-175; Neumayer and Plümper 2007; WHO 2014:16; Dasgupta et al. 2010). Women – especially older women -- are more likely than men to die in heat waves (Nagel 2015:30; Rainham and Smoyer-Tomic 2003) despite their deeper social networks compared to men, which can help women’s climate resilience (Global Gender and Climate Alliance 2016:24).

Women’s health, especially reproductive health, may be gravely affected by fossil fuel extraction, processing, transport, and other forms of pollution related to climate change (Klein 2016:428-430; WEA & NYSHN 2017; de Onís 2012; WHO 2012; WHO 2014). Climate change also produces mental health impacts for women that are most pronounced during and after extreme weather events (Clayton et al., 2014). Pregnant women may be at special risk during extreme weather events; anxiety and stress can induce obstetric complications. Women may also be more vulnerable to psychosocial health impacts due to multiple demands they face following extreme events during the processes of moving, caring for families, cleaning up, resettling, and recovering (Duncan 2008; Nagel 2015:62; Toronto Public Health 2009:8). Insofar as these health impacts (e.g. cancer, miscarriages, genetic damage to foetuses, etc.) affect future generations, they represent *intergenerational injustice* due to climate change.

Since women make up the majority of health care workers, both formally and informally, the health impacts of climate change have implications for many women’s home and work lives, besides their devastating implications for those who are directly affected (WomenWatch 2010; WEI 2015).

The causes and ‘benefits’ of climate change are gendered

Partly because of their relative poverty compared to men, women’s lower consumption levels make them less responsible for fossil fuel consumption (Cohen 2015) and less likely to profit or benefit from the economic systems which produce and perpetuate climate change (Moosa and Tuana 2014; Klein 2016; Lambrou and Piana 2006:2). For example, 79 percent of Fortune 500 corporations’ board members and 95 percent of their CEOs are men (Lindzon 2016; Mather 2015); six of the top 10 firms are involved primarily in fossil fuels (Danaher et al. 2007:192). Of course gender is not the only important measure of climate change responsibilities and benefits – age, income, skin colour, ethnicity, sexuality, class, location, country, and many other aspects of individual identity and position are involved, as

discussed below (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014:421) – but gender differences are economically ubiquitous and notoriously resistant to change.

Also due to gendered socio-economic positions and roles, women are generally made responsible for the decisions and work required to “green” the economy household by household, for example by composting and recycling wastes, planning energy-saving, reducing carbon-intensive practices such as meat consumption, and organizing community-based environmental initiatives. As noted above, these responsibilities take women’s time away from other potential activities and have costs for the women themselves, which are often not recognized or compensated.

In polls, women consistently express more knowledge and concern than men do about climate change, stronger pro-environmental attitudes, and greater willingness to take action and vote for climate policies (Nagel 2015:166-182; Perkins 2017). Men’s lower rates of concern and activism are often understood as being related to their relative social position and sense of invulnerability (Nagel 2015:168; Goldsmith et al. 2013:161). The resulting delays in developing and implementing effective climate change policies increase the intensity and impacts of climate change – another intergenerational injustice feedback loop.

Climate-related policy development is gendered

From local communities to the United Nations, despite the growing literature on gender and climate change, attention to gender in climate change policy is still largely absent (Alber 2009; Bonewit 2015; Nagel 2015; McNutt and Hawryluk 2009; Skutsch 2002). A 2012 report found that “women’s involvement in climate change decision-making at national, European and international levels is still low” and that women are a low proportion of graduates in scientific and technological fields deemed important for climate change response (EIGE 2012: 3; Hemmati 2008; Morrow 2012). The moment an emergency is declared by government bodies (for example, when there is an extreme weather event or power outage caused by a storm), the institutions that take over are the ones that are the most top-down and male-dominated: the army, police, power authorities, firefighters and disaster-relief organizations (Enarson 2012). Climate finance – decisions about how to use funds directed locally, regionally, or globally for climate change mitigation and adaptation – usually ignores the needs and views of women, which is inefficient at the very least (Schalatek 2009).

Both at the level of representation – policy makers are mostly men and the insights from women’s lived experience with climate change are under-represented (Alber, Cahoon and Röhr 2017), and at the level of theory – feminist ethical and ontological frames and methods are usually ignored in policy circles (Nelson 2011; Moosa and Tuana 2014; Nagel 2015; MacGregor 2010), climate change policy remains gendered in ways that ignore and undermine women’s interests.

Intersectionality can heighten the effects of gender

Gender and climate researchers emphasize the importance of an intersectional standpoint – recognizing that each person’s complex identity affects how they are implicated and affected by climate change (Godfrey and Torres 2016; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Moosa and Tuana 2014; Osborne 2013; Rodríguez 2015). This means recognizing the importance of power relations, situated contexts for different people, and how social groupings affect material outcomes. For example, studies of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans have found that material vulnerability increased in proportion to peoples’ intersecting types of marginality: ‘race,’ gender, class, economic situation, sexuality, education level, etc. (Luft 2009; Tuana 2008; Pyles and Lewis 2010). Indigenous peoples, in particular, have been excluded from climate decision-making bodies and consultation, despite evidence that they bear extreme risks and damages from fossil fuel extraction and climate change, and despite Indigenous women’s activism and powerful leadership (Walsh 2016; Gorecki 2014; Narine 2015; Nixon 2015; Perkins 2017). As emphasized in feminist theory (Spencer et al. forthcoming), a gendered perspective on climate justice involves attention to all aspects of social difference and their interrelationships, since power relations create marginality along many intersecting dimensions (Ravera et al. 2016; Wilson 2017; Godfrey and Torres 2016).

Efficiency in policy approaches requires attention to vulnerability and gender

Women’s lived experience, responsibilities and skills often make them experts on the best ways to use limited resources to address climate-related challenges. Including their views is economically efficient and a shortcut to effective climate policies (Perkins 2017; Isla 2009; Perera 2012).

“Time and again, experience has shown that communities fare better during natural disaster when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction. Women tend to share information related to community well being, choose less polluting energy sources, and adapt more easily to environmental changes when their family’s survival is at stake. Women trained in early warning disaster reduction made a big difference in La Masica, a village in Honduras that, unlike nearby communities, reported no deaths during Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Integrating gender perspectives in the design and implementation of policies and laws also helps meet the gender-differentiated impacts of environmental degradation – shortage of water, deforestation, desertification – exacerbated by climate change” (ILO 2008:3).

Recommends the International Labour Organization, for example:

“Actions to promote climate change adaptation and mitigation [should include]:

- Tapping into the vast knowledge and natural resource management abilities of women when devising adaptation and mitigation policies and initiatives for climate change.

- Mainstreaming gender perspectives into international and national policies.
- Ensuring that women and men participate in decision- and policy-making processes.
- Promoting participatory approaches in local and community planning activities.
- Creating opportunities at the national and local level to educate and train women on climate change, stimulate capacity building and technology transfer and assign specific resources to secure women's equal participation in the benefits and opportunities of mitigation and adaptation measures.
- Gathering new sex-disaggregated data and gender analysis in key sectors such as agriculture, tourism, forestry, fishing, energy and water usage to further understand how climate change impacts on women's lives." (ILO 2008:5).

Gender perspectives generate rich theoretical insights

To facilitate 'gender justice as climate justice', better research and policy are needed. Virtually all studies on gender and climate call for more research, better data collection, and more attention to the gender equity and justice implications of climate change.

Much better equity-focused and gender-disaggregated data is necessary in order to measure and acknowledge distributional impacts and inequities. Collaboration and interdisciplinary work including the fields of political ecology, public health, social work, disaster and risk management, economics, anthropology, sociology, ecology, toxicology, medicine, and gender studies is needed. Gender budgeting can serve as a model for considering various justice interests and priorities related to climate change, including those resulting from adaptation strategies (Terry 2009:12-13).

From the perspective of *procedural justice*, women's stronger risk perceptions, smaller carbon footprints, and protective environmental policy activities are useful in the struggle to strengthen climate change policies (Terry 2009:8-9); as their voices, political agency, and representation become stronger, women's perspectives and activism are crucial. There are many potential contributions of gender perspectives for climate change research and policy development: intersectional analysis provides more detail for better policy; studying relationships among people and their interdependence is more realistic than just considering individuals; seeing 'facts' as driven by the desires of investigators and 'reality' as situated, not universal, is more accurate (Kronsell 2017; Tuana 2013; Israel and Sachs 2013; Bell 2013; Bee, Biermann and Tschakert 2013).

For example, human connections with and reliance on other species and complex ecosystems brings *interspecies justice* into focus as a key component of climate justice (Moosa and Tuana 2014:688; Plumwood 1994).

Strategic climate action must be gendered

From a policy perspective, climate change heightens the importance of pay equity, affirmative action, training of women and men for jobs across the spectrum of employment, and a broader view of what work should be paid work and how much it should be compensated – traditional and long-standing labour market challenges. This parallels the heightened importance of income distribution, development and poverty reduction priorities in general, especially in times of climate change, and is true in both the global North and the global South.

For women to be able to assume a fair share of the jobs and responsibilities connected with global change, the following elements must be in place for them:

- access to education, training and upgrading
- access to and control over productive resources including access to land and ownership rights
- access to markets (land, labour, financial and product markets)
- access to services
- benefits from the use of public funds, particularly for infrastructure, and access to public goods
- means of enforcing claims for unpaid / reproductive work and redistribution/remuneration for such work
- the possibility of generating income from the use of their own labour (Bäthge 2010:7).

Climate change throws into stark relief the gendered costs of capitalism, industrialized globalization and economic ‘development,’ over the same time period when fossil fuel emissions have skyrocketed worldwide, heating up the Earth (Mies 1986; Mellor 1992; Buckingham and Le Masson 2017; Arora-Jonsson 2011). This is one reason why ‘climate justice and gender justice’ overlap so closely with ‘gender and development’ imperatives. Calls for climate justice and gender justice are in effect a reiteration that problems inherent in the expansion of the global capitalist system (worsening income distribution, intractable poverty, resource wars, violence against women, migration, and environmental devastation, along with climate change) cannot sustainably be addressed from within the system; fundamental system transformations grounded in place-based democracy, transparency, equitable civic rights for all, diversity, and public action are imperative (Klein 2014; Awâsis 2014; Buckingham and Le Masson 2017; Salleh 2009; Gibson-Graham 2006; Kaufman 2012). In fact, many women activists are working toward and leading such transformations.

Women’s leadership and activism catalyzes system change and climate justice

For all the reasons noted above, women have long been leaders in environmental movements and activism (Perkins 2013; Mellor 1997). Global solidarity and

gendered partnerships are modelling how to build progressive, alternative governance structures capable of addressing climate change equitably, especially at the local/urban level (Perkins 2017a; Röhr et al. 2008; Alber et al. 2017; Röhr et al. 2010; Ostrom 2014; Perkins 2014). Such initiatives and models include equitable local-economy institutions, cooperatives and land trusts, community gardens and food programmes, childcare and elder care cooperatives, support for victims of gender-based violence, water-harvesting schemes, community shelters, agro-forestry projects, and many other collective livelihood and care initiatives, which are appropriate for local socio-ecological conditions (Kaufman 2012; Gibson-Graham 2006, Klein 2014). All bring people together to build community resilience in the face of climate change while developing the skills and relationships necessary for equitable and sustainable commons governance. As noted by Elinor Ostrom (2014), the winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, successfully managed commons in polycentric networks allow people to reduce their dependence on both markets and the state, thus increasing their climate resilience by creating new collective, environmentally based governance structures.

The successes of Indigenous women's activism on climate change, extraction, and environmental damage (Perkins 2017a), and their clear distinction that for many this activism is grounded not in feminism so much as in 'Indigenous womanism' and Indigenous land-based cultures, are an indication that the gendered meanings and implications of climate change (among other 'Anthropocene' phenomena) are transformative and emergent (Perkins 2017b; Fortier 2017; Troster 2009; Godfrey and Torres 2016). These changes cannot be grasped without a respectful; intersectional understanding that also recognizes the deep connections between Indigenous cultures and responsibilities to the land and water (Horn-Miller 2017; WEA & NYSHY 2016; Awâsis 2014; White 2014).

An intersectional perspective on climate justice thus involves a great deal more than rectifying – for ethical reasons -- the inequitable impacts of climate change on the female half of humanity in terms of *distributional, procedural, and corrective justice*. When women's situated experiences and expertise, diversity, and gendered roles in production and reproduction are taken into account, climate justice for women increases the welfare of all humans – economically, socially, and politically, both *intra-generationally and inter-generationally*. Moreover, the cultural expertise of Indigenous women and the activist leadership of marginalized and highly-impacted women are replacing the unsustainable systems that produced climate change in the first place, building *intra-species and inter-species resilience* that has great potential for restorative transformation of the Earth.

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