
Gender, Militarism and Climate Change

As evidence of climate change becomes ever more compelling, the battle over who gets to frame its causes, effects and solutions will intensify. In popular as well as policy venues, whose voices get heard and whose don't will become a key political issue of our time. Today, at the international policy level, gender is conspicuous by its absence in climate change debates. In fact, the words "women" and "gender" are missing in the two main international global warming agreements, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol. Recent feminist scholarship and advocacy challenge this invisibility of gender, pointing in particular to the importance of gendering the analysis of vulnerability and adaptation to global warming.

Feminist work on vulnerability draws on previous research regarding what makes certain populations more at risk in natural disasters such as floods and droughts, extreme weather events that could become more prevalent as the result of global warming. For example, in places where women have less access to food and health care than men, they start off at a disadvantage when facing natural disasters and environmental stress. Since they are often the primary caregivers for children and the elderly, they may also have less mobility. Cultural restrictions on women's mobility can compound the problem. During the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh many more women died than men because early warnings were displayed in public spaces where women were prohibited and women delayed leaving their homes because of fears of impropriety.

Rather than relying on broad generalizations, feminist scholars and practitioners have developed gender-sensitive risk mapping in which women map their own vulnerabilities in terms of what crops they cultivate, what resources they do or do not control, their access to irrigation, markets, information, etc. In this sense, gender analysis is a tool to explore diverse contexts and come up with locally effective solutions rather than a one-size-fits-all understanding of vulnerability.

So far, much of the literature on gender and vulnerability to climate change has focused on rural women in the global South though in a few decades the majority of the world's people will live in cities. As hurricane Katrina illustrated, the global North is not immune to extreme climate events either, and the degree of vulnerability people in New Orleans experienced was closely correlated with gender, poverty, race, age and class, and the intersections between them. Given the likelihood that risks associated with climate change will increase in the years to come, gender-sensitive risk mapping and data collection would be useful tools for communities, rural and urban, all over the world.

Much also remains to be done to make early warning systems more attentive to gender issues. According to Maureen Fordham of the Gender and Disaster Network, mostly male experts dominate this field, and the traditional emphasis is on ('hard') scientific and technical approaches to the identification of hazards and the solution of problems with little attention given to the role of women's networks and other citizens' groups in developing informal warning systems. The field of disaster management is similarly dominated by men, and women's needs for information and services are often neglected in disaster response.

Given the wholesale neglect of gender issues in international climate change agreements, it is not surprising that little attention has been paid to how those agreements themselves may have gendered outcomes. In a critique of the Kyoto Protocol's approach to carbon trading, Larry Lohmann of the U.K.-based Corner House points to how the resulting carbon accounting systems marginalize non-corporate, non-state and non-expert contributions toward climatic stability and are creating new exclusionary forms of property rights. They favor large-scale carbon sequestration projects in the South that can have both negative social and environmental consequences. For example, in Minas Gerais, Brazil, the Plantar S.A. Corporation has asked for carbon finance for its expanding monoculture eucalyptus plantations. These plantations not only occupy public lands that by law should go to poor peasants, they draw down the water supply and greatly reduce biodiversity.

Such plantation schemes are likely to have a number of gendered effects. For example, women will not have access to them for domestic fuelwood collection, and the few jobs they generate for forest guards, etc. will go largely to men. Since women in many places rely on wild plants both for food and seed domestication, loss of biodiversity could reduce their livelihood resilience. Nor are such plantations likely to contribute to solving the longer-term energy needs of poor women. According to Margaret Skutsch of the Gender and Climate Change Network, the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism has effectively shut the door on small-scale, non-corporate solutions such as systems that encourage local control of existing forests and improvements in their ability to sequester carbon and produce sustainable fuelwood supplies.

In general, little effort has gone into analyzing how gender relations affect the drivers of climate change. For example, in the global North, which is disproportionately responsible for global warming, the transport sector is a primary source of greenhouse gases. Perhaps with the exception of the U.S., women in the global North are less likely to own cars and more likely to use public transport. Moreover, in Europe the cars women drive tend to be smaller and more fuel-efficient because they are not viewed as status symbols. This latter point underscores the need to look at gendered dimensions of consumer desires as they affect energy use. Advertising is highly gendered - the typical SUV or pick-up driver portrayed in automobile ads in the U.S., for example, is a male, either alone or with his mates, out to conquer the rugged wilderness. If there are women in the picture, they are usually sleek and beautiful, adding an element of sex appeal. Thus notions of masculinity and femininity are strategically deployed to create and sustain a wasteful, gas-guzzling culture, from promotion of ATVs as 'toys for boys' to the military-civilian Hummer crossover as a potent symbol of American manhood.

Gendering climate change also requires keeping a close eye on fine line between justifiable concerns about the threats posed by global warming and the strategic deployment of alarmist discourses to build support for the Kyoto protocol as well as to serve other more problematic objectives. Here one has to closely monitor implicit and explicit gendered narratives that reinforce negative views of women and poor people.

A case in point is the framing of women in terms of the population threat. Apocalyptic predictions of population growth overshooting the carrying capacity of the planet have long been popular in Northern environmental circles, particularly in the U.S. where there has been a long relationship between the population lobby and the mainstream environmental movement. Those seeking to shift the blame for global warming from Northern consumption and production patterns to poor people in the South often make use of alarmist population arguments.

For example, Professor Chris Rapley, director of the British Antarctic Survey, recently made headlines in the British press when he argued that without significant population reduction, there was

little hope for effectively coping with climate change. The implicit message is that women's fertility must be controlled. In the past, such reasoning has contributed to the implementation of draconian population policies deeply harmful to women's health and rights.

Population alarmism also figures in images of starving waves of global warming refugees washing up on our shores, as illustrated in a 2003 Pentagon-commissioned abrupt climate change scenario where reductions of carrying capacity in overpopulated areas cause increasing wars, disease, starvation and ultimately migration to the North. This kind of threat narrative incorporates women into an overall menacing portrait of the Third World poor and reinforces the authority of national security agencies over civilian initiatives to tackle climate change.

One way to challenge such military maneuvers is to focus on how militaries themselves play a significant but neglected role in global warming. The Department of Defense is the largest single consumer of fuel in the U.S., accounting for 1.8% of the nation's total transportation fuel. This is no mean contribution to global warming, given that the U.S. is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Militaries elsewhere also disproportionately consume energy supplies; according to one estimate, worldwide militaries collectively use the same amount of petroleum products as Japan, one of the world's largest economies. In the case of the U.S., the irony is that the military is presently using vast amounts of oil to fuel a war in Iraq fought at least in part to ensure future American control of oil supplies.

Casting a gendered eye on both militarism and climate change raises a number of inter-related questions. What are the gendered politics of setting strategic and budgetary priorities? How do ideologies of masculinity and networks of powerful men shape defense policies, shield the military from the need to reduce fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions, and determine that spending on conventional defense is a much higher priority than investing in clean energy sources and technologies?

How does male military culture impact consumer choice via products like the Hummer and sustain wasteful energy-intensive lifestyles?

How does a state of war undermine democratic freedoms, push women out of the public arena and reduce the space for inclusive debate on how to address global warming?

How does militarism multiply and/or intensify women's vulnerabilities to climate change? In the case of global warming-induced natural disasters, for example, will the risk of sexual violence increase if governments rely on military institutions to supply relief and maintain order?

On the more positive side, how can women's movements for peace and the environment contribute to a broader vision of climate justice and more practicable solutions that reduce emissions while increasing the incomes and power of poor women and men?

These are but a few of the questions we need to be asking to mount an effective feminist and social justice challenge to business as usual in the climate change arena.

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