The Intersectional Nature of the Climate Crisis

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13 December 2024

This brief provides a framing of the climate crisis, as it is approached in multilateral settings such as the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), from an intersectional perspective. The paper deconstructs - conceptually - common understandings of climate change problems in relation to social issues such as gender, migration and land and Indigenous rights. I argue that the language used to address the intersection of social problems with climate change is a powerful tool in and of itself and that it must be carefully revised and utilized in order to ensure that justice has a central space in any discussion and solution to climate change.

How climate change intersects with social issues – beyond a technical and scientific perspective

Climate change is an issue of environmental justice both in *who* it impacts and *how* it impacts them, but also in the type of *solutions and projects that are proposed* to mitigate or adapt to climate change. This is because climate change is more likely to cause disproportionate harm to low-income countries and low-income populations in higher-income countries. While climate change mitigation and adaptation policies may be able to *minimize* these harms, they could aggravate them unless they are developed and implemented with an eye toward promoting justice and fairness and have critically engaged with the understandings underlying the approaches. While climate change policies may help to mitigate the effects of climate change on already marginalized people, there is no guarantee that they will be *just* at the local, national, or global level.

Due to the urgency of the climate crisis, a lot of issues of recognition, distribution, procedure (the three tenets of environmental injustice; Walker, 2009) or justice are sidelined – and the urgency in itself seems to justify this marginalization (Dunlap, 2020). This urgency pushes the voices of those already disadvantaged further outside of the realm of influence. This is reinforced by capitalist structures (such as class and the market) that are guiding our understandings of climate change, valuations of the environment, and our proposed solutions.

It is also important to be careful about which words we use when we think about problems relating to climate change like "vulnerability" or "resilience". Vulnerability tends to disempower and victimize those affected, potentially erasing their agency – instead creating an image of an innocent, passive victim (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Resilience is also limiting, because it fits the actions of a person or community within a certain model of how they should act (e.g. techno-managerial ways of life within capitalism; Kaika, 2017). Instead we should think: ***what is making us vulnerable, or making us need to be resilient?***

Questioning both of these is important because an overreliance on them effaces a structural critique of climate change and *individualizes* the causes, consequences, and solutions. All of this plays into understanding the **intersectionality of climate change**. Some arenas in which the intersectional lens is relevant is in our approaches to gender, migration or land rights issues within climate change and climate change approaches or solutions.

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Carastathis, 2014) is the compounding of different social categories, i.e. race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, ability, but it can also be levels of education, religion. These categories are dynamic and constructed by society (given value culturally) and play with each other, creating social positions that change over time and place. Feminist approaches to intersectionality highlight the relational nature of power. Taking the intersectional analysis a step further means directly critiquing structures that create and reinforce these categories. Finally, intersectionality is multi-level, it plays into horizontal (inter-community) and vertical (national, regional, local) interactions. A limitation of the concept of intersectionality is that it does not fully know how to account for class, as class is not simply a characteristic of identity – it is a structure.

Gender and climate change

With regards to gender and climate change, the analysis of the impacts of climate relies strongly on gender binaries and stereotypes of two genders. The common evidence right now is that women are disproportionately affected by climate change, with a lot of research and money in the development sector acting at this particular intersection of 'gender' and climate change. However the reality is that it is not focusing on *gender*, because it does not question *why* women are more affected: thus, it focuses on a specific characterization of the woman within the prism of climate change.

As such, the woman becomes the perfect, passive victim to climate change, while the man lacks the female sensitivity of caring for the environment (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Resurreccion, 2013). The power relations that have given women an inferior and disadvantaged position in most societies are ignored instead to use *social constructions of gender* as the basis of analysis for vulnerability relating to climate change. This means interventions that may well intentionally target women can produce negative effects by not carefully analysing the gendered power relations resulting in these inequalities.

Therefore, deconstructing climate change from a gender perspective requires going beyond the effects of the climate *on women* to the *understanding of the gendered construction of nature-society relations*

and economies that are at the roots of the climate change crisis. Analysing this issue with the imagery of a tree would place symptomatic responses to gender inequalities above the ground, and the deconstruction of gendered realities and inequalities at the roots. This analysis does not want to erase the fact that women are often bearing the brunt of climate change. However, it reminds us that these inequalities are a result of structures that already marginalize them. Therefore interventions should not *only* target the above water symptoms, but the hidden roots as well.

Gender norms, and the subsequent gendered division of labour, rather than the attributed gender of a person, can shape ecological knowledge and risk perception. Knowledge around climate change (causes, effects, implications) can be formed through one's daily activities (Thompson-Hall et al, 2016). If the women deal more with water for the household, they will have a different relationship with water than men who may use it for farming. Therefore, if traditional gender norms mean that women spend more time in the private sphere, busy with household tasks, they prioritize dealing with risks immediately dealing with the household unit, while the men prioritize risks to their productive activities, e.g. farming.

Migration and climate change

Migration is another key topic in climate change. There are three types of migration at play – migration that already exists that is being exacerbated by climate change, migration that is induced by climate change, and climate-reductive migration (i.e. it happens for structural reasons *other than* climate change). One's ability or need to migrate is fundamentally impacted by one's identity and place in society, calling for an intersectional analysis.

The literature suggests that the main expressions of climate change with an effect on migration are sea level rises and flood risk. Other elements can be droughts. There are four patterns of climate-induced migration (Kaczan & Orgill-Meyer, 2020): (1) climate-induced migration is not necessarily correlated to poverty levels; (2) climate-induced migration tends happen for long-distance domestic moves rather than local or international moves; (3) increased migration is more likely caused by slow-onset climate changes (such as droughts) than rapid-onset changes (such as floods); and (4) the severity of climate shocks impacts migration in a nonlinear fashion.

Climate-reductive migration is the idea that a pattern of migration is attributed to climate change rather than to the realities of the socioecological landscape. Dewal (2023) analyses the case of Bangladesh, where she writes that all migration tends to be conflated with the issue of climate change. The author suggests that studies in Bangladesh attributing migration to climate change "misreads coastal vulnerabilities and the importance of migration as an agrarian livelihood strategy to deal with rural precarity and debt and misread existing gendered vulnerabilities." She argues that this skewed understanding of the causes of migration based on tropes of Bangladesh as a 'climate change victim' damages public debate on solutions for, for example, rural underemployment, flood management and land loss. It also erases how migration is constrained/enabled by kinship relations. Another example she gives is how floods in Bangladesh place the population in a precarious situation not due to increasing intensity of the flood but inadequate flood technology that was imposed in colonial times

and is continuously reinforced by international, multilateral development aid projects that do not work with local populations but impose foreign 'scientific' expertise.

Land and Indigenous rights and climate change
Considering land rights and Indigenous rights within the prism of climate change cannot be disentangled from the environmental justice perspective. The intersectionality approach can be limited here because it does not question power sufficiently, including the manifestations of the histories and violence of colonization.

The market-based approach to climate change directly comprises the respect of Indigenous, human and land rights. It has upgraded the colonial practice of land grabbing to one of green grabbing whereby the need to address climate change (and the idea of a green industry and a financial valuation of the effects of climate change) justifies possessions of the land – not only from Indigenous peoples but also superseding municipal power to prioritize national and private interests (Fairhead et al, 2012; Karam & Shorkgozar, 2023). From an environmental justice perspective, these large scale renewable energy projects do not present equitable climate change solutions.

In Norway, the national government decided to exponentially increase the production of wind energy for export to Europe. The Fosen Vind farms were proposed in the 1990s and then built in the 2010s without the law requiring them to re-consult with the municipality or with the Saami. They did an environmental impact assessment, checking off the requirement of consulting Indigenous peoples, but the current application of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, does not require them to *listen* to those they consult: they just have to say they did it. In 2023 the verdict from the Supreme Court of Norway stated that two of the wind farms were violating international human rights laws protecting Indigenous livelihoods. The best solution for the affected Saami was to accept financial settlements, even though they wanted the turbines to be dismantled (Reuters, 2024). This demonstrates a huge power imbalance – even if the law technically sided with the Saami – between the big players in the renewable energy industry (the private developers including energy companies and investment banks from across the world) against the local people who have the projects imposed on and around them (Karam & Shorkgozar, 2023). The way these projects are implemented violate the tenets of environmental justice and create 'sacrifice zones' of land and of the respect of human and Indigenous rights.

There are also problematic statements or approaches when considering how Indigenous peoples are affected by or engaged with climate change, including, like with gender, relying on a categorization of Indigenous peoples as environmental stewards on the land. The problem is that we impose Western idea(l)s of what environmental protection looks like on other cultures and livelihoods. An example is in Canada where seal hunting is a central livelihood and cultural component for the Inuit, but environmental groups, such as Greenpeace, criticized them for years for this activity (Randhawa, 2017). Therefore if we designate all Indigenous peoples (also grouping them into a homogenous group which they are not) as what we see as "environmental stewards," then we are imposing on them how we *think* they should be caring for the environment. However Indigenous approaches to human-nature relations are different from those of non-Indigenous peoples. The value should not be our definition of

'environmental protection' but noticing that centuries Indigenous peoples have lived and worked *with* the land, not violently extracting *from* it, whereas our models have not worked sustainably.

Conclusions and recommendations

Across the examples of gender, migration and Indigenous rights, we have explored the benefits of taking an intersectional approach to the climate crisis. The objective of this brief was to critically engage with some of our commonly held understandings in the discussions around climate change. However it has also shown that there are other considerations that must also be included in an intersectional approach, such as *history* (particularly of colonization) and *class*.

In conclusion, taking an intersectional approach allows us to go **beyond quantitative limitations of assessing climate change interventions** and to **re-politicize and re-claim the human element**. In line with the principles of environmental justice, solving the climate crisis should *not* be an excuse to marginalize concerns, communities or individuals under the pretense of its urgency.

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