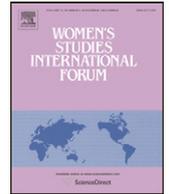


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## Ecofeminism and climate change



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### SYNOPSIS

Issues that women traditionally organize around—environmental health, habitats, livelihoods—have been marginalized in debates that treat climate change as a scientific problem requiring technological and scientific solutions without substantially transforming ideologies and economies of domination, exploitation and colonialism. Issues that GLBTQ people organize around—bullying in the schools, hate crimes, marriage equality, fair housing and health care—are not even noted in climate change discussions. Feminist analyses are well positioned to address these and other structural inequalities in climate crises, and to unmask the gendered character of first-world overconsumption; moreover, both feminist animal studies and posthumanism bring awareness of species as an unexamined dimension in climate change. A queer, posthumanist, ecological and feminist approach—brought together through the intersectional lens of ecofeminism—is needed to tackle the antifeminist threads companioning the scientific response to climate change: the linked rhetorics of population control, erotophobia and ecophobia, anti-immigration sentiment, and increased militarism.

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Since the times of Ancient Rome, Lady Justice has been depicted wearing a blindfold representing objectivity, holding scales to weigh competing claims in her right hand, and a sword of reason in her left hand. Contemporary feminist justice ethicists have critiqued the masculinist bias of traditional western ethics for the ways it overvalues reason and objectivity, devaluing women's standpoints and women's work and envisions justice-as-distribution of resources among discrete individuals with rights, rather than emerging through relationships which shape participant identities and responsibilities (Jaggar, 1994; Warren, 1990; Young, 1990). Ecological feminist ethics have addressed human relationships with other animals, with environments, and with diverse others locally and globally as relations meriting contextualized ethical concern (Donovan & Adams, 2007). But a feminist ethical approach to climate justice—challenging the distributive model that has ignored relations of gender, sexuality, species, and environments—has yet to be fully developed.

To date, climate change discourse has not accurately presented the gendered character of first-world planetary

overconsumption. For example, a prominent symbol from the Copenhagen Climate Conference of the Parties (COP 15) in December 2009 depicts an obese “Justitia, Western Goddess of Justice” riding on the back of an emaciated black man; in other artworks for the conference, a group of starving African male bodies was installed in a wide river (see Fig. 1). The image of Justitia was captioned, “I’m sitting on the back of a man—he is sinking under the burden—I will do everything to help him—except to step down from his back” (Sandberg & Sandberg, 2010, 8). Allegedly an artwork referencing the heavy climate change burden carried by the global South, and the climate debt owed by the overconsuming global North, from a feminist perspective the missing critique is that the genders are reversed: women produce the majority of the world's food, yet the majority of the world's hungry are women and children, not men. And the overconsumption of earth's other inhabitants—plants, animals, ecosystems—is not even visibly depicted.

In this essay, I argue that climate change and first world overconsumption are produced by masculinist ideology, and will not be solved by masculinist techno-science approaches. Instead, I propose, queer feminist posthumanist climate justice

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Fig. 1. Justicia.

perspectives at the local, national, and global levels are needed to intervene and transform both our analyses and our solutions to climate change.

### Herstory: women's climate change activism

Although the “first stirrings” of women's environmental defense were introduced at the United Nations 1985 conference in Nairobi, through news of India's Chipko movement involving peasant women's defense of trees (their livelihood), women's role in planetary protection became clearly articulated in November 1991, when the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) organized the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida (Resurrección, 2013; WEDO, 2012). Seen as an opportunity to build on the gains of the United Nations Decade for Women and to prepare a Women's Action Agenda for the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the World Women's Congress drew more than 1500 women from 83 countries. But while its leaders alleged that the resulting “Women's Agenda 21” had been built through a consensus process, for many of those sitting in attendance, listening to one elite speaker after another, it was not clear how our views shaped or even contributed to this process of agenda-formation. Participatory democracy—long a valued strategy in grassroots ecofeminist tactics—was reduced to two dubious threads: a series of break-out discussion groups held throughout the conference, and a “Report Card” for participants to take home and use to evaluate specific issues within their communities and mobilize a local response (shaping the issues themselves had no place on the report

card). Along with other ecofeminists, I felt a mix of energy, dismay, and frustration at this gathering.<sup>1</sup> While the women leaders from many countries were valuable participants and decision-makers in the upcoming conversations at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, that weekend in Miami, too many speakers discussed women's “feminine” gender roles, our “influence” on decision-makers, and the need for “reforms” to the present system—all introduced and capped with the essentializing motto, “It's Time For Women to Mother Earth.”

Despite these flaws in rhetoric and democratic participation, WEDO's 1991 World Women's Congress has been hailed as the entry-point for feminism into the UN conferences on the global environment, opening the way for later developments bridging feminist interventions and activisms addressing climate change. The following year, UNCED's Agenda 21 did not in fact include the most transformative recommendations from the Women's Agenda 21—the analysis of environmental degradation as rooted in military/industrial/capitalist economics, for example—or even the more reformist proposals such as implementing gender equity on all UN panels, an issue which has been taken up again at the 2013 Council of the Parties (COP) for the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#) in Warsaw, Poland (See Fig. 2).

Perhaps WEDO's Women's Agenda 21 had already been undermined by the 1987 report from the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, led by Brundtland, 1987. This report established “sustainable development” as a desirable strategy, defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”—which sounds reasonable enough, until one reads the document's renewed call for continued economic growth on a finite planet, a fundamentally unsustainable endeavor. The report completely omits discussion of the First World/North's<sup>2</sup> over-development and its high levels of production, consumption, and disregard for the environment (Agostino & Lizarde, 2012). Nonetheless, the Brundtland Report's “sustainable development” concept has shaped climate change discourse for the subsequent decades, producing techno-solutions such as “the green economy” that have perpetuated capitalist and colonialist strategies of privatization, and fail to address root causes of the climate crisis (Pskowski, 2013).

In the two decades since WEDO's Women's Agenda 21, feminist involvement in global environmentalism has developed from a 1980–1990's focus on “women, environment and development” (WED), “women in development” (WID) or “gender, environment and development” (GED) to an emphasis on feminist political ecology in the 1990s–2000s (Goebel, 2004; MacGregor, 2010; Resurrección, 2013). Initially, discussion of women and environment focused on women in the global South, whose real material needs for food security and productive agricultural land, forest resources, clean water and sanitation trumped more structural discussions about gendered environmental discourses (i.e. Leonard, 1989; Sontheimer, 1991), although these structurally transformative elements were equally present in other texts (i.e. Sen & Grown, 1987). The focus on *women* rather than *gender* tended to construct women as *victims* of environmental degradation in need of rescue; their essential closeness to nature, cultivated through family caregiving and through

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