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Moving Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries to Respond to Climate Change

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Abstract Gender blindness has been diagnosed and redressed in many social science disciplines as the case studies in this volume show. Many early studies of environment and climate change in the natural and the social sciences were similarly gender blind. But increasingly scholars, policymakers and practitioners are recognising that gender matters in the experience of, and responses to, climate change and in extreme weather events which are rising in frequency and severity. Moreover, women are increasingly prominent in local, regional and global fora in promoting climate justice and this is matched by a fertile, transdisciplinary field on gender, environment and climate change. Forging coalitions between natural and social scientists, between scholars, activists and policymakers is crucial at a time when we are experiencing a climate emergency of global proportions.

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M. Sawer et al. (eds.), *How Gender Can Transform the Social Sciences*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43236-2_19

Keywords Environment · Gender · Climate change · Resilience · Climate justice

Gender Blindness in Social Science Disciplines and Transdisciplinary Terrains

This volume offers compelling case studies of how sharply focusing a gender lens has brought innovative and illuminating insights to the disciplines of economics, history, political science, sociology and philosophy. These insights which have translated into significant impacts both within and beyond the academy, shaping political debates and the policies of governments and international organisations. These studies have critiqued the 'gender blindness' of prior disciplinary regimes in scholarship and social life, regimes which have privileged and normalised male experience as 'human'.

Similar questions about gender in research and action on the environment and climate change reveal *both* similarities and differences. There is striking similarity in the interaction between scholarship, political activism and policy changes. But, in contrast to the established masculinist turf of the disciplines discussed in this volume, in studies of gender, environment and climate change, we witness a far more diffuse transdisciplinary terrain, engaging several disciplines in the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. These relationships have not always been easy and there are several distinct and contested streams in scholarship and politics which I analyse below. The epistemologies and methods of the natural sciences are often very different to those prevailing in the social sciences. But increasingly environmental scientists are seeking insights from social scientists and social movements in translating their stark predictions in public fora where scepticism and denial is being stoked by many fossil-fuelled interests.

Women and Nature: The Changing Face of Ecofeminisms

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a powerful mingling of concerns between feminist and environmental movements. A classic early text by Vandana Shiva (1988) argued that patriarchy universally and violently oppressed both women and nature and suggested there was an inherent, indeed a 'natural' link between women and nature. She found evidence for this in Indian history, tracing antecedents of the 1970s Chipko movement against deforestation to Hindu movements in Rajasthan c. 1730 whereby women sacrificed their lives to protect sacred *khejri* trees. Her ecofeminist philosophy informed political campaigns including those against genetically modified crops and she received death threats for her political activity. Similar but more nuanced scholarly arguments were developed by Sherry Ortner in anthropology who argued that it was women's reproductive biology, their bearing and nurturing of children which led to cultural logics in which women were seen as closer to nature than men. Eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1993) suggested that the dualism of reason/nature simultaneously subordinated women, indigenous people and non-humans. She argued against anthropocentrism, the 'hyperseparation' of humans from nature and their presumption of mastery. She was actively involved in struggles to halt deforestation and preserve biodiversity in Australia.

But such connections between women and the environment were early critiqued as essentialist. In the specific case of India, it was suggested that Shiva ignored the patriarchal character of Hinduism, its texts and practices and the oppressive character of the caste system which linked the alleged pollution of women and of lower castes. More broadly it was suggested that a focus on women's proximity to nature risked reimprisoning women in a series of oppressive dualisms: nature/culture; emotion/reason; public/private.

Moreover, both anthropologists (such as Marilyn Strathern 1980) and philosophers (such as Judith Butler 1990) challenged the universality of the nature/culture distinction, suggesting that this dichotomy and the associated distinction between sex and gender was not universal but rather emerged in Europe during the so-called 'Enlightenment' period.

In other times and places, there was rather a philosophy grounded in an undivided ontology connecting humans and non-humans as kin: animals, plants, even mountains and rivers, all part of a shared, animated world of vibrant life. These connections were typically severed by processes of imperialist intrusion and capitalist development, creating profound global inequalities of race and class which interacted with those between men and women.

Later ecofeminist thought and practice was far more intersectional, sensitive to the interaction of gender with class, race, religion and sexuality. More recently, queer ecologies have challenged the heteronormative presumptions in notions of women's closeness to nature, celebrating the diverse forms of reproduction, sexual and non-sexual, in the non-human world of plants and animals. Donna Haraway (2015) for instance, has brought an innovative feminist lens to the study of climate change. In response to the suggestion by some scientists that we have entered a new epoch, the Anthropocene, in which human agency is fundamentally transforming the planet's environment, or others that we are living in the Plantationocene of late capitalism, she has proposed the Cthulucene, a rather unpronounceable but more humble and earthy way of naming this new era. Rather than placing humans as sole agents of change, this term highlights the interwoven, non-hierarchical, symbiotic mode of living across species. Haraway enjoins us to use the feminist passion for making kin to celebrate our connections with other species rather than hubristically privileging our human exceptionalism.

Engendering Climate Change: Women as Victims and Agents in Climate Change

Such abstract scholarly reflections on women and nature, gender and the environment have become far more concrete and urgent in the light of the contemporary climate emergency. As scientists have been predicting for decades, the dramatic increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has resulted in global warming, melting glaciers and permafrost, rising sea levels, acidification of the ocean, and the increased frequency of severe weather events—droughts and fires, floods and cyclones—which are no

longer merely 'natural' disasters. In much of the early scientific literature on climate change and social science literature on programs of mitigation and adaptation, there was an effective gender blindness.

A series of feminist scholars across the social sciences and humanities challenged this, revealing a profound gendering of discourse and practice around climate change and disaster preparedness. Bernadette Resurrección (2013) witnessed the political traction of twin rhetorical figures: women are both 'climate vulnerable' and 'agency endowed', while Arora-Johnson (2011) observed how women are viewed as either especially vulnerable (e.g. in India) or virtuous (e.g. in Europe) in their relation to the environment. This shuttling between seeing women as victims and agents is palpable if we compare the gendering of climate-change discourse and programs in specific places such as Oceania and the Philippines.

Climate change is a pressing present reality in Oceania. In many photographic images and documentary films and in texts from scholarly articles to policy documents, women (sometimes with children) are portrayed as the pre-eminent vulnerable victims. An early report emanating from Australia (PACCSAP 2011: 31) suggested that 'the inclusion of women in locally focused assessments and adaptation is essential not only because women are especially *vulnerable*, but also because they can be *valuable* contributors to adaptation work [my emphasis]'. Women engaged in farming or fishing are often seen as having a special relationship to the environment with unique ecological knowledge, echoing a problematic essentialism. Their heightened vulnerability is often linked to global arguments about the feminisation of poverty and to accumulating evidence from Asia and Africa that during and after disasters, women have been subject to increased risks of sexual and gender violence and take far longer to recover from the impacts of disasters. Ongoing research in Oceania raises questions about whether *all* women are inherently more vulnerable. This is true of poor women, single mothers, those not living in their ancestral homes, in precarious urban settlements, women with a disability, those displaced after a disaster or those who are lesbian and transwomen. However, monolithic presumptions that all women are inherently vulnerable can obscure the agency of Oceanic women and portray them yet again as in need of saving.

Such representations of women as vulnerable victims can co-exist with notions of their distinctive agency—usually distilled in the idea of 'resilience' pervasive in contemporary climate change policies and programs. Notions of 'resilience' tend to be grounded in local 'communities', in the rural grassroots rather than the urban spaces of male-dominated state politics and burgeoning commodity economies. In the western Pacific, women are often seen to be especially crucial for everyday resilience projects in rural village settings (and can hence acquire undue burdens). So, it is perhaps unsurprising that in several later policy documents on gender and climate change in Oceania, women are seen as critical to 'resilience'. For example, the 2015 UN Women Climate Change Pacific Brief entitled, *Gender, Climate Change, and Disaster Risk Management*, observes that: 'Women are not victims, and their contributions will be fundamental to effectively adapting to the effects of climate change and building resilience to disasters' (UN Women 2015: 2). But, privileging local resilience programs risks shifting the responsibility from states and non-state actors (NGOs and international organisations) and ultimately deflecting blame from the big polluters, those countries and corporations who are ultimately responsible for our unprecedented climate emergency.

In the Philippines, Maria Tanyag and her colleagues have taken these arguments about gender, climate change and disaster even further. On 8 November 2013, the super typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda) made landfall and within a day devastated the Eastern Vasayas region of the Philippines, causing 6300 reported deaths and the internal displacement of four million people of the 14 million in the region. Several years afterwards, many of these people were still living in evacuation centres or temporary shelters and the wake of the typhoon was still flowing through their lives. As Tanyag and her colleagues showed, both the short-term and long-term impacts of typhoon Haiyan were gendered. Dominant myths of survival—that there is a local culture of mutual aid, that Filipinos are endlessly resourceful in times of crisis and that overseas remittances are a crucial help—were disseminated both by state media and non-state actors. Although these might have boosted morale during the emergency period, they occluded the ongoing suffering connected to both gender and class hierarchies.

Tanyag (2018) suggests that the notion of resilience is a neoliberal discourse which relies particularly on women's self-sacrifice and draws on cultural expectations of female altruism. The routine and unequal demands on women and girls to care for others become infinitely expansive in the context of greatly heightened needs during and after the crisis. Their own self-care and their own rights to sexual and reproductive health and autonomy are vitiated. They do not share equally in the material resources distributed in the wake of the disaster and their own productive and reproductive contributions to survival remain undervalued, uncounted and unpaid. Pre-existing material inequalities between rich and poor, men and women are exacerbated as women's bodies are depleted. Tanyag points out how 'disaster resilience' as a discursive tool relies on norms of female altruism at the household and community levels so that post-disaster responsibilities are increasingly divested away from the state. These insights about the Philippines have a far broader global resonance.

Rise! Women in Resistance and Creative Activism

Women are increasingly visible in acts of resistance and hope in the face of climate change—as leaders in local, regional and global fora and in creative activism. It is true, as some authors argue, that early global fora for political leaders such as the annual UN Conference of the Parties (COP) and scientific meetings, canonically the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), were at first primarily meetings of men and dominated by technical, scientific issues and concerns about risk and security. But increasingly, we see women at the vanguard of political processes dedicated to redressing the worst effects of climate change. Christiana Figueres from Costa Rica was a key architect of the Paris Agreement at COP 21 and her country was one of the earliest to use exclusively renewable energy for electricity. Greta Thunberg is the female face of the powerful movement of young student activists—though both her youth and her gender have been vilified by conservative critics and climate-change deniers and sceptics.

Former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, has also been prominent in the movement for climate justice, especially during her time as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002). In her book *Climate Justice: A Feminist Solution to a Man-Made Problem* (2018), Robinson celebrates the dedication of many women (and one man, Anote Tong, long-term President of Kiribati) in movements to raise awareness about climate change and connect climate justice and gender justice. Successive chapters celebrate the work of women from the Global South, showing how in the face of devastating disasters such as floods and droughts and in the more constant catastrophe of being poor, they evinced a strength to catalyse others, to raise awareness and fight against the ravages of climate change. For example, Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim a cattle herder from Chad witnessed how her cows were producing far less milk, how lush grassland pasture had become dry and brittle, how Lake Chad had shrunk dramatically and desertification in the Sahel had spread. Seven million people around Lake Chad are suffering severe hunger, half a million children are malnourished. Houdou formed an association of Indigenous women to fight this and took the struggle up to the level of global UN meetings. She campaigns not just against the big polluters, but to ensure that Indigenous knowledge is part of the solution.

Women have proved crucial in environmental movements and NGOs working on climate change and disaster preparedness. Organisations like One Million Women founded by Natalie Isaacs and DIVA for Equality (Diverse Voices and Action for Equality) in Fiji make crucial connections between climate justice and gender justice for women and, in the case of DIVA, especially for lesbian, bisexual and transwomen. Yet, despite this global activity there is still a perceived lack of women and gender perspectives at the major fora of international climate-change diplomacy such as the UN Conference of the Parties. In the context of COP 23 in Bonn and in the lead-up to COP 25, recently relocated from Santiago to Madrid, there were protests that women's voices had been silenced and their concerns marginalised. Such protests can be performative; at COP 23 in Bonn many women stood in protest lines with their mouths covered with black tape, protesting deficiencies in a diluted Gender

Action Plan and what they perceived as the silencing of women and non-binary people.

So, it is increasingly important to acknowledge the role of gender in creative expressions designed to raise awareness and inspire activism against climate change. One prominent example is the work of 350.org in the Pacific and in particular the Pacific Climate Warriors. In photographic images, in protest meetings and blockades, they have used their signature credo: 'We are not drowning, we are fighting'. Both men and women here assume the posture of warriors, which they insist is resistant but non-violent. In some of the most influential videos released by 350.org, we see the feminine warrior figure of Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner, spoken-word artist from the Marshall Islands, and daughter of the first female President of that country, Dr. Hilda Heine, also an outspoken leader on climate change. In her acclaimed performance at the United Nations Summit in New York in September 2014, *Matefele Peinam*, Jetn̄il-Kijiner combined the emotional tug of her maternal connection to her then infant daughter with a staunch, angry expression of Oceanic sovereignty against the fossil-fuelled countries and corporations that are causing seas to rise, engulfing the atolls of her homeland and causing the waste of US nuclear explosions to seep into the ocean. And, in a more recent collaboration with the Greenland poet Aka Niviâna, in the video performance of their poem *Rise* (2018)—as the glaciers melt in Greenland and the seas rise in the Marshalls—they exchange the stones and shells of their homelands in an act of sororal empathy to promote resistance in the face of climate change.

Conclusions

As we see the reality of climate change in every part of the world today, sustaining hope is hard but very necessary. And, in that struggle, it is important to witness how gender has been perceived both in relation to a more benign and beneficent 'nature' and how it is newly relevant as we face environments that are far more uncertain and potentially portend catastrophic futures. The struggle is both scholarly and deeply practical and political.

There is a challenge in transdisciplinary scholarship on the environment insofar as the quantitative methods, the use of huge data sets and the highly technical skills entailed in making models and projections can be at odds with the methods of social science scholars relying less on quantitative surveys and more on qualitative methods such as participant observation, interviews, oral histories and focus groups. Sometimes there has been a hubristic presumption by natural scientists and epistemic injustice in failing to credit 'soft' qualitative data as equally 'evidence'. Challenges continue in translating between scientific approaches to climate and everyday understandings of weather, and especially those Indigenous ontologies which unite natural and cultural changes and/or discern divine causations for such changes.

But, increasingly, some environmental scientists are seeking insights from the social sciences and the environmental humanities and from creative artists as they look for new ways to engage broader publics. Environmental scientists have found it deeply disturbing that their increasingly dire and urgent predictions are failing to translate into effective political action. The Paris Agreement of COP 21 was justly celebrated but implementation is slow or even going backwards. Many polities, communities and corporations are declaring a climate emergency, but we need to move beyond rhetoric to urgent action: to renewables as a source of energy, to stop deforestation and to plant more trees, to transform meat-intensive, industrial forms of food production, etc. Such action is often blocked by climate denialists captive to fossil-fuel interests who are resistant to the dazzlingly clear evidence of climate change all around our world. Forging strong coalitions between natural and social scientists, between scholars, activists and policymakers is crucial at a time when we are experiencing a climate emergency of global proportions.

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