

1 INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE?

Close your eyes and think of the phrase “climate change.” What are the pictures that come to mind? Some might see scientists giving presentations in front of graphs. Some might see communities fleeing floods or wildfires. Some might see people waving signs and chanting at a protest. Who are the people in these pictures? How likely is it that the same person is visualized in each picture—presenting at a conference, walking through a flooded landscape, and attending a protest? Chances are we envision different people in each of these scenes. Why might this be the case? At a very basic level, that is what this book is about. It asks about the roles or characteristics we associate with a certain category of people in climate change debates: women. What characteristics do we expect them to possess? What tasks do we assume they perform? What spaces do we suppose they exist within? And what are the implications of these representations for goals such as gender equity and environmental sustainability?

Numerous environmental problems are urgent and important. The international community faces biodiversity loss, deforestation, water scarcity, and a whole host of other environmental challenges. With all of these pressing environmental concerns, why do we seem to hear so much more about climate change than these other issues? Why is it that climate change seems to dominate the attention of the global media, policymakers, and scholars? According to Sikina Jinnah (2011, 1), “It is difficult to find an international organization, corporation, NGO, university, foundation, religious organization or government agency that does not have a climate-relevant program or focus. . . . It seems that everyone, from McDonald’s to the Vatican is

jumping on the proverbial climate change bandwagon.” Global policy negotiations that at one time would have been focused on a specific environmental issue such as desertification or fisheries are now more often framed through the lens of climate change (Axelrod 2011; Conliffe 2011). For better or worse, climate change has captured our attention in a way that few other environmental issues have.

One major reason for this disproportionate focus on climate change is the urgency and scale of it. Climate change is widely referred to as one of the greatest global challenges faced by the international community. Reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicate that climate change is currently resulting in a wide range of negative impacts on both humans and ecosystems, and these impacts are predicted to worsen in the future (IPCC 2014a, 2018b). Recent climate-related extremes, such as heat waves, droughts, and floods, reveal substantial vulnerability and exposure to climate variability for many ecosystems and human communities. These kinds of climate-related extremes result in changes to ecosystems, alterations in the availability of resources such as food and water, destruction of infrastructure and damage to settlements, negative impacts on mental health and well-being for many people, and even death. Climate-related hazards serve to exacerbate other stressors, particularly for people in precarious economic or social positions. With the effects of climate change being unevenly distributed, those that are already vulnerable become even more so because of factors such as the uneven distribution of climate change impacts across communities, a deficiency in adaptation capacity, and a lack of access to decision-making structures.¹ Although climate change has broad societal consequences, its impacts tend to be felt most by historically marginalized populations.

From the perspective of a social scientist, one might argue that climate change dominates environmental discussion because it has been politicized in many countries. We see this politicization in disagreements about not only how to address it, but whether it even exists as a problem. In multiple states in the global North, where this book is focused, people on one side of the political spectrum express stronger belief in and concern about climate change than those on the other (McCright, Dunlap, and Marquart-Pyatt

2016; Unsworth and Fielding 2014). In this context, politicians who express support for climate action signal information to voters far beyond their environmental stance. The scholarly literature has attributed this politicization to, among other things, “the behavior of political party elites, the ‘anti-environmental countermovement,’ and scientists from all sides who engage in public debate” (Pepermans and Maesele 2016, 479). Topics that are controversial tend to get a great deal of media coverage. There has been a sharp increase in the amount of climate change stories published in the global media since the mid-2000s, particularly across the global North.²

Despite the increased media, policy, and scholarly attention to climate change, humanity still has a long way to go before we achieve effective paths to both mitigation and adaptation. This is because climate change is a particularly tricky and complex political problem (Underdal 2017). Kelly Levin, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld (2012, 124) highlight some of this complexity by conceiving of climate change as a “super wicked problem” with four important characteristics: we are running out of time to effectively stop the problem; the actors who are most responsible for causing the problem are also the ones who are trying to provide a solution; we lack a strong central authority that could help address the problem; and we tend to see policymakers and the public push responses into the future. “Together these features create a tragedy because our governance institutions, and the policies they generate (or fail to generate), largely respond to short-term time horizons even when the catastrophic implications of doing so are far greater than any real or perceived benefits of inaction.”³ Climate change governance has been frustratingly slow and incomplete.

I started graduate school in 2003, the same year that over one thousand people died in heat waves across major European cities. More than a decade later, researchers attributed roughly half of those deaths to climate change (Mitchell et al. 2016). Over the years, climate change has come to dominate several fields of study, including environmental sociology, environmental geography, and my academic home of global environmental politics.⁴ Climate change work seems to overshadow our academic journals and conferences (Dauvergne and Clapp 2016). Within academics, climate change research spans the divides of the natural sciences, social sciences, and

humanities. Since the 1990s, scholarship has significantly advanced crucial understanding of the scope and scale of humanity's experiences with climate change. Climate change is a difficult political and social problem not because we lack information about it. It is difficult because it is wide-ranging and challenges many current "truths" about how humans can and should engage in economics, politics, and other social processes. In this way, perceptions and understanding of climate change are just as important as the physical processes of rising temperatures, changes to disease vectors, or sea level rise.

Additionally, many different actors with varying interests and perspectives take part in global debates about climate change. Some of these, such as the media and various social movements, have a powerful role in shaping our individual assessments of climate change. Even though media portrayals of climate change differ around the world (Vu, Liu, and Tran 2019), they serve as an influential source of information for average citizens about climate science, policy goals of mitigation and adaptation, and the like (Boykoff and Roberts 2007). Similarly, studies find that environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can influence understandings of environmental issues (Eden, Donaldson, and Walker 2006; Newell 2000). In these ways, multiple actors shape perceptions of climate change and guide assumptions about the major topics of debate as well as who is having those debates. Thus, while it is essential to understand the physical realities about global issues such as climate change, it is also necessary to make sense of social perceptions of them.

The central contribution of this book is, then, to help fill in some of the gaps in understanding the politics and actions around climate change.⁵ It argues that representation matters. The roles and identities assigned to people crucially shape expectations about who should be present in climate change spaces, who is a legitimate voice in those spaces, what jobs and tasks we should assign, and who we should look to for insight about existing problems and paths forward. In particular, this book examines how women are portrayed in climate change debates. It asks questions such as where is women's presence or absence recognized? What tasks are they expected to perform? What factors influence their roles? The book identifies four distinct but related discourses on women and climate change. Each highlights a characteristic, condition, or position associated with women's activities in

and experiences of climate change. They provide a multifaceted portrayal of women in/and climate change, but they also demonstrate types of homogenization and generalization that at times can be detrimental to the goals of sustainability and gender justice.

EXAMINING GENDER

Scholars have detailed ways that climate change exacerbates patterns of marginalization and vulnerability as they manifest across different spaces (e.g., the global North versus the global South, rural communities versus urban communities), as well as across different social cleavages such as gender, class, and race (Adger 2006; Barnett, Lambert, and Fry 2008; Bohle, Dowing, and Watts 1994; Brklacich, Chazan, and Bohle 2010; Cutter 2006; Denton 2002; Eakin and Walser 2007). This book touches on all of these divisions but focuses specific attention on gender.

Feminist scholars have been examining the concept of gender for decades. At a very basic level, gender can be viewed as a set of socially constructed ideas about what people identified as “men” and as “women” ought to be and do (Detraz 2017b). Understanding gender to be a product of social construction means that assumptions of “masculine” and “feminine” behavior are not to be taken for granted. There is not a normal or natural way to be, but rather humans are exposed to expectations that (1) they should fit within the category of either “men” or “women” and (2) there are acceptable ways for “men” or “women” to be or act. In the first case, most dominant discourses of gender function as a binary with masculinity on one side and femininity on the other. Individuals are expected to fall on one side or the other, and those who refuse (to) or confuse (us) are regarded as transgressive (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Rao 2014). In the second case, while gendered expectations are fluid—they shift over time and across societies—they are still a powerful force for shaping behavior. The existence of multiple forms of masculinity and femininity within a given society at a given time does not blunt the multiple ways that gender works on us every day. Though most can recognize that current understandings of femininity look different from expectations in the early 1900s, for example, this does not mean that we are

not still punished or rewarded for complying with dominant expectations of gender today. Additionally, because gender is a social construction, change is possible, but not always easy to come by. The fluid nature of gender results in multiple actors both shaping and reinforcing the dominant discourses about gender. Change, then, requires shifts across a multitude of actors and spaces, many of whom are resistant to alteration.

This view of gender largely speaks to the presence of gender norms in everyday lives, or how gender works on people. Another important aspect of gender is how concepts, discourses, actions, and actors are also influenced by norms about masculinity and femininity and how those associated with masculinity are given greater priority than those associated with femininity. Institutions such as the military, for instance, are inseparable from the norms of masculinity. They guide expectations about the people and actions expected to be present in military and militarized spaces, as well as the behavior and perspective of the institutions themselves (Duncanson 2009). Because of the way gender typically appears in everyday speech, it is often conceptualized as referring only to assumptions about people. This is a limited idea of gender. Actions can also be gendered. For instance, feminist scholars talk about the gendered nature of economic processes (Elias and Roberts 2016; True 2012; Waylen 1997), gendered violence against people and places (Castillo 2008; Staudt, Payan, and Kruszewski 2009; Whetung 2019), and gendered environmental attitudes (Anshelm and Hultman 2014; Pulé and Hultman 2019).

Another shifting aspect of gender is the various ways it relates to other aspects of identity. Gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, caste, ethnicity, and dis/ability in the ways that society understands difference, acceptance, and value. The term “intersectionality” was coined by critical race and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s to highlight the various ways that modes of marginalization interact (Crenshaw 1989, 1994). Over time, intersectional analysis has become widely adopted and adapted across multiple disciplines. Several feminist environmental scholars in particular have argued that intersectionality is an essential component for analyzing how multiple kinds of power differentials work together within environmental issues (Braun 2011; Djoudi et al. 2016; Lykke 2009; Kaijser and

Kronsell 2014; Manning 2016). In addition to paying attention to gender as a multifaceted concept, this book also considers ways that gendered marginalization and agency intersect with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, national origin, and other forms of “difference.” Intersectional research focuses on the simultaneous and interactive effects of these categories of difference. It explores multiple, co-constituted differences.

Understanding gender in the context of climate change discussions involves recognizing how societal ideas of acceptable and appropriate roles and behaviors shape climate change impacts, policymaking, and policy implementation as well as the lived experiences of each of these for human beings. While there are regularized gendered patterns of experience in the realm of environmental change, scholarship has tended not to be examine them closely (MacGregor 2006; Sandilands 1999). Gender “works” on and in society through multiple processes. Examining connections between gender and the environment or gender and environmental action requires thinking through multiple complex assumptions about where environmental damage comes from and how it might be addressed, along with how traits, actions, and people are valued.

GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE SCHOLARSHIP

A great deal of scholarship has focused on links between gender and the environment generally and gender and climate change more specifically. Feminist scholars have long explored environmental topics, particularly through work associated with perspectives such as ecofeminism,⁶ feminist political ecology, environmentalist feminism, eco-critical feminism, and critical feminist eco-socialism (Detraz 2017b; Lykke 2009; Mies and Shiva 1993; Plumwood 2006; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996; Seager 2003; Sturgeon 1997; Warren 1997). While there are important debates that take place among these categories of feminist environmental scholars, one of the threads that tie their work together is their commitment to taking gender seriously in considerations of the causes of environmental change, experiences of environmental degradation, and the economic, social, and political implications of these phenomena.

As discussed above, gender manifests in multiple ways in the daily experiences of individuals. This means that gender works in myriad ways through the causes and experiences of environmental problems along with policy choices of solutions to them. At the same time, gender identities themselves are constructed in part through environmental struggles and practices. Farhana Sultana (2009, 428), for instance, claims that “gendered subjectivities are socially and discursively constructed but also materially constituted; subjectivities are produced through practices and discourses, and involve production of subject-positions (which are usually unstable and shifting). Subjects are always embedded in multiple relations of power, and are interpellated differently across space and time.” This means that while socially constructed gender norms influence relationships to our environment, the association also goes the other way: society’s very ideas about masculinity and femininity can be bound up with understandings of the environment and our place within it. For example, certain tasks are often considered to be “men’s work” or “women’s work.” An individual’s inability to perform those tasks then suggests something about that person’s identity as a man or a woman (Nagel 2012).

Feminist scholars highlight the specific associations between the relative position of people in society and the ways that they experience and/or contribute to environmental change. In so doing, they consider the power relations and social norms that shape lived experiences. For instance, some feminist authors claim that the systems of domination that contribute to the marginalization of women and other groups are frequently the same systems of domination that contribute to environmental change (Plumwood 2002; Seager 1999). This kind of work calls attention to the importance of unraveling multiple forms of power relations in order to understand how they influence drivers and experiences of environmental change as well as the policymaking process that address them.

There is a great deal of breadth to the gender and climate change field. Research topics include gendered experiences of climate change impacts, how climate governance is gendered, and how gender shapes understanding of climate change. For instance, several studies examine ways that gender shapes phenomena associated with worsening climate change in the context

of a particular state. This work focuses on topics such as gender and adaptation, migration, food insecurity, or natural disasters (Alston 2011; Cannon 2002; Detraz and Windsor 2014; Nagel 2016), often in sites in the global South (Andersen et al. 2017; Azong and Kelso 2021; Haynes 2017; Team and Hassen 2016).

The literature on gender and climate governance highlights both the ways that gender influences policy approaches and participation in climate governance (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Magnusdottir and Kronsell 2015; Zhou and Sun 2020). Gunnhildur Lily Magnusdottir and Annica Kronsell (2015), for example, examine the representation of men and women in Scandinavian climate policymaking as well as whether climate policy is gender sensitive. They find that although women were not underrepresented in the political and administrative institutions responsible for climate policy, having a critical mass of women in the institutions has not led to critical acts on gender in policymaking. Gender has not been central to the policymaking process. Studies like these call attention to both gender representation and how gender functions in climate governance.

Another strand of the literature highlights ways that understandings of climate change are influenced by gender norms and gendered experiences (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Dankelman 2010; Djoudi et al. 2016; MacGregor 2010, 2017a). This scholarship explores themes such as gendered discourses or perceptions of climate vulnerability, including ways that women in the global South and global North are cast in predictable roles as either environmental victims or environmental saviors. In the words of Sherilyn MacGregor (2010, 228), “Gender analysis and the study of gender politics should involve the analysis of power relations between men and women and the discursive and social constructions of hegemonic masculinities and femininities that shape the way we interpret, debate, articulate and respond to social/natural/ technological phenomena like war, economic crisis and climate change.” Along these lines, some scholars examine gendered climate expertise and the production and reception of climate knowledge by critiquing the supposed value-neutrality of climate science and economics (Nelson 2007; Tuana 2013). While much of this work explores gender broadly or connections between women and climate change more specifically, there is

a growing body of academic work on the intersections between men, masculinities, and environmental change as well (Anshelm and Hultman 2014; Enarson and Pease 2016; Kinnvall and Rydstrom 2019; Pulé and Hultman 2021). For instance, scholars examine ways that struggles faced by men and boys during natural disasters can be magnified or exacerbated by assumptions that they are to be stoic and strong (Ariyabandu 2009; Rydstrom 2019; Enarson and Pease 2016). Other studies also trace masculinity to climate denial and fears about loss of social and economic position (Anshelm and Hultman 2014). Martin Hultman (2017) in particular has written extensively on conceptualizing masculinities within environmental discourses. He and Jonas Anshelm remind us that, like the concept of femininities, that of masculinities is “always-in-the-making within and part of material-semiotic antagonistic discourses, which are the embodied nature of knowledge, materiality, meaning and power” (Hultman and Anshelm 2017, 19). Each of these strands of the gender and climate change literature offers important reminders of the numerous ways that understanding and experience of and policymaking and action around climate change is gendered.

There are many different ways to think about gender and climate change. Scholars who contribute to this literature span multiple academic disciplines, and their work is often interdisciplinary. My goal, however, is not necessarily to tell these scholars something dramatically new about gender and climate change. Rather, my goal is to illustrate how people in climate change spaces already use discourses of women and climate change. It is to reflect on how these discourses at times complement existing scholarship as well as often contain storylines at odds with much of the literature. I seek to examine whether and where the discourses are compatible with the goals of environmental sustainability and justice.

In particular, I intend for the book to be of interest and use for scholars in global environmental politics and professionals in other climate change spaces, as well as scholars in women and gender studies. In particular, I seek to shine a light on how many climate scholars and practitioners already think and experience gender without necessarily being aware of it. The discourses presented in the following chapters represent understandings of gender in both conscious and unconscious forms. I argue that these discourses are

necessary to evaluate and critically engage with in order to ensure that (1) attention to gender and climate change increases, and (2) this increase takes place in ways that are oriented towards both justice and sustainability goals.

Gender is an underexplored topic within global environmental politics. A quick search for “gender” in the journal *Global Environmental Politics*, arguably the most high-profile journal in the subfield, results in fewer than twenty research articles. There have been attempts to include gender in the field to a greater extent (MacGregor 2017b), but it is a topic that remains underexplored. This is perhaps not that surprising given the history and composition of international relations (IR) and political science more broadly in which both environmental politics and feminist IR have been left out of the core (Green and Hale 2017; Tickner 2014). It is my hope that *Women and Climate Change: Examining Discourses from the Global North* can be part of the conversation about how scholars and practitioners can explicitly think about how gender is already present in our work and what it will look like in a future marked by some form of climate change.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The following chapters provide a discursive map of some of the qualities, tasks, and positions associated with women in/and climate change. Chapter 2 explains the methodological approach of the book, including some of its similarities to *Global Environmental Politics* and feminist IR. It provides a detailed account of the feminist constructivist lens used to examine links between power and knowledge that fundamentally shape understanding of gender as well as climate change. This feminist constructivist approach allows for the analysis of discourses that both reinforce and challenge existing gender norms, as well as highlighting multiple forms of agency along with marginalization or exclusion.

Each chapter that covers a discourse begins with an examination of the perspective of an interviewee that illustrates some of the central storylines of the discourse. These are designed to not only highlight the properties of the discourses, but also to offer a glimpse into the world of the women working in climate change with whom I spoke, including the specific roles that women

are expected to play or characteristics of women that affect their connections to climate change. Each chapter ends with an evaluation of the implications of the discourse.

Chapter 3 focuses on one of the most visible storylines associated with women: vulnerability and victimhood. These include the idea that women have socially mandated responsibilities that intersect with climate change impacts, and that they often lack adaptative capacity to effectively deal with climate change. It sees women as uniquely burdened by climate change. It explains how interview participants utilize this discourse in ways that both conform to typical discussions of vulnerability in environmental politics and policymaking as well as reject the idea that gender necessarily connects to the role of victim.

Chapter 4 addresses connections between women, caregiving, and climate change. It explores the role of the caregiver as it relates to climate change causes, impacts, and policies. While these care storylines are often connected to women through a specific focus on mothering, they also relate to other socially conditioned care expectations that are regularly associated with women and femininity. The chapter specifically highlights storylines such as caregiving roles influencing women's thinking about climate change, motivating them to get involved in climate change action, and shaping their approach to parenting. It also details ways in which actors use care and motherhood storylines strategically in climate change work.

Chapter 5 covers the discourse of women as knowledgeable about climate change and considers how women tend to be less likely to engage in climate skepticism and more likely to educate others about climate change. The chapter also features an examination of some of the roles that participants identified for knowledgeable women. These roles include climate change leader/diplomat, someone who provides knowledge to others, and someone who generates climate change information through research.

Chapter 6 examines a range of roles that women are assumed to play in the realm of climate change. This includes potentially positive as well as negative roles related to environmental sustainability. Thus, the chapter explores how routine activities that women engage in can drive climate change and but also how they deploy a range of strategies to combat climate change.

Additionally, the chapter focuses on ways that women's participation in climate change work is denied, overlooked, or undervalued. It highlights multiple storylines related to the idea of women being constrained, limited, or underestimated, ranging from women's literal absence in some climate change spaces to ways that their contributions are belittled or undervalued. Finally, the chapter examines some of the consequences of action that interviewees described for themselves and others.

The final chapter assesses the four discourses taken together. The chapter offers suggestions about the implications of the dominant discourses and storylines, as well as reflections on how we as scholars might learn from these depictions of women and climate change in our quest for the transformations required by environmental sustainability. It puts forward frames of representation that allow us to be more inclusive and reflective of women and the range of tasks they currently perform. Taken together, the chapters shed light on the multifaceted discourses used to describe and comprehend women and climate change. They illustrate ways that our stories of women and climate change conform to stereotypical understandings of gender and how they challenge them. They reveal existing limitations as well as the potential for developing complex frames of women and climate change that are useful for shifting our debate into new terrain.

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Women and Climate Change

Examining Discourses from the Global North

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