

4 WOMEN AS CAREGIVERS: CARE ROLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Gwen works for a US-based organization that uses a motherhood frame to discuss environmental concerns. Her organization considers climate change, air pollution, and other environmental issues as health challenges for families. She coordinates the organization's policy advocacy work, which is centered on "the big policy changes that we need to make" across the country. In her words,

Our goal is to arm people with the knowledge about what the impacts of burning fossil fuels is on . . . our health—what's the impact on our children? What's the impact on our bodies as women? What's the impact on our children in utero? When they're young? On nursing moms? What are those health impacts that we are not talking about? That we're not driving that connection for people? And how do we educate them so that they want to take action?

Gwen mentioned that she was motivated to get involved in climate change work after reflecting on mercury levels in fish when she was pregnant with her second child. As she thought about the connections between pollution from coal-fired power plants and toxicity in fish, she became angry that women are told not to eat tuna when pregnant while companies are told not to pollute the air. This encouraged her to volunteer for the environmental organization where she now works.

When I asked for her reaction to the phrase "gender and climate change" she responded:

For me, a lot of it is impacts of climate change on bearing children and having children. I'm an eternal optimist, but the choice that women have, or the choice

women make about having children . . . we need to start thinking about what the impact is going to be on our kids. So, if I'm having a baby in nine months, that baby is going to be around for 75, 80, 90 years. What is the world going to look like? And as women, we now need to start thinking about that.

As seen here, the concepts of motherhood and care dominated Gwen's account of why she started environmental action, the activities of her current environmental organization, and how gender and climate change are connected. Each of these ideas represent storylines in a *women-as-caregivers* discourse.

The previous chapter described ways in which women are cast as vulnerable, as a segment of society whose marginalization and exclusion render them especially susceptible to the impacts of climate change. While many participants identified the single mother to be the epitome of the vulnerable woman in the global North, women's caregiving responsibilities were often identified as influencing how they are likely to experience climate change in communities around the globe. In this perspective, women are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts because they perform the primary caregiving role for families. More generally, women are envisioned as playing care roles that intersect with climate change experience and action. These roles include women as mothers caring for young children, cooking for families, worrying about family finances and struggles, and tending to older relatives—each of which will be discussed below as connecting to climate change. The following sections outline the *women-as-caregivers* discourse as it was expressed in the interviews. It 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 how actors use care/motherhood storylines strategically in climate change work. The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of using a caregiving discourse to describe and understand women and climate change.

CARE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The concept of care enters academic debates about environmental change in numerous ways, including the place of care in environmental ethics,

assessments of climate change and care burdens, and the connections between caregiving and environmental attitudes and behavior. Various scholars have asked what role “care” has in environmental ethics (Donovan and Adams 1996; Friedman 1987; Plumwood 2006; Robinson 2011; Whyte and Cuomo 2016). This literature has evaluated how the idea of care shapes assumptions about both human communities and our relationships to ecosystems. Kyle Powys Whyte and Chris Cuomo (2016, 234) explain that “ethics of care understand moral agents as deeply and inextricably embedded in networks of ethically significant connections and conceive of caring as exercising responsibilities and virtues that maintain and positively influence relationships and general flourishing within those overlapping networks.” A well-known example of a care ethic is environmental historian Carolyn Merchant’s (1995, 217) partnership ethic grounded in the concept of relation between humans and the nonhuman world. This partnership ethic of earthcare has four principles: “equity between the human and nonhuman communities; moral consideration for humans and nonhuman nature; respect for cultural diversity and biodiversity; and inclusion of women, minorities, and nonhuman nature in the codes of ethical accountability.” While she is careful to caution against essentializing the position of women to caregivers or mothers, she does focus on gendered experiences of care resulting in unique environmental knowledge and responsibilities.

This focus on gendered experiences and divisions of labor is common in much feminist environmental work, particularly early ecofeminist scholarship (Salleh 1997; Shiva 1989). For instance, Mary Mellor (2006, 102) argues that “women are not closer to nature because of some elemental physiological or spiritual affinity, but because of the social circumstances in which they find themselves.” Accordingly, gender norms influence how humans experience times of environmental stress, particularly for those who are expected to care for others in their household or community. Fiona Robinson (2011, 155) argues that “soil erosion, deforestation, depletion of water reserves, climate change, and the increasing severity and intensity of ‘natural’ disasters—all of these processes have fundamental implications for our ability to care for particular others with whom we exist in a relationship.” Environmental stress makes it more difficult to provide care as well

as increasing the care burden for those expected to shoulder it, particularly women (Robinson 2011).

A large body of feminist work examines ways that climate change impacts increase the unpaid care burden for many women (Alston 2015; Arora-Jonsson 2011; Dankelman 2010; Detraz 2017b; Paavola 2006). And this is on top of already existing global discrepancies between women and men. A 2015 report from the United Nations Development Programme finds that women continue to have a large unpaid care burden: “Across most countries in all regions, women work more than men. Women are estimated to contribute 52 percent of global work, men 48 percent. But even if women carry more than half the burden, they are disadvantaged in both realms of work—paid as well as unpaid work—in patterns that reinforce each other” (UNDP 2015, 11). Scholars argue not only that the gendered care burden often left out of evaluations of current economic systems, but that it is also frequently missing in assessments of where humanity might go in the future. For instance, feminist economists have argued that most approaches to a green economy fail to consider the care crisis that exists alongside economic and environmental crises (Bauhardt 2014; Littig 2017).

An additional strand of literature reflects on the connections among caregiving, parenting, gender, and environmental attitudes (Blocker and Eckberg 1989; Blocker and Eckberg 1997; Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Hamilton 1985a, 1985b; Levine 1982). Early studies by Lawrence Hamilton (1985a, 1985b) demonstrated that gender and parenthood interact when it comes to environmental concerns, with mothers being more concerned about environmental threats than either men or women without children. These results were echoed by other studies showing that there might be something unique in the way that mothers view or experience environmental issues (Blocker and Eckberg 1989; Davidson and Freudenburg 1996). The most consistent finding across the academic literature on gender and environmental attitudes is that gender is significantly associated with the extent of concern about specific environmental problems (McCright 2010; Mohai 1997; Xiao and McCright 2012), with women expressing greater levels of concern over “local” environmental issues with perceived health risks to family and community (Bord and O’Connor 1997; Mohai 1992).

Other work illustrates links between caregiving and the creation and spread of environmental norms (De Groot & Steg 2009; Matthies, Selge, and Klöckner 2012; Matthies and Wallis 2015). This work is premised on the idea that caregivers can influence the environmental attitudes and behavior of those they care for. For instance, in a 2012 study of Danish families, Alice Grønhøj and John Thøgersen found that adolescents' pro-environmental behavior is heavily influenced by norms within their family, specifically by how strongly it is manifested by their parents. Likewise, Gary Evans, Siegmund Otto, and Florian Kaiser (2018) find that people who grew up in the United States with mothers holding more pro-environmental attitudes tended to engage in more pro-environmental behavior as young adults.

Caregiver discourses are also a staple in media and policy depictions of the adverse effects of climate change. Stories of struggling mothers and vulnerable children are often repeated in global climate change debates. Portrayals of women carrying babies through floodwaters or walking hand-in-hand with a child through a parched field “reflect the durable binding of the lives and fates of women and of children in public imaginaries” (Rosen and Twamley 2018, 1). In fact, policy documents often point to an implicit connection between these two categories by lumping “women and children” into a single group. Highly visible sources such as the Rio Conference's *Agenda 21*, reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the text of the Paris Agreement, among numerous others, repeatedly associate women with children as related, vulnerable groups (IPCC 2014b; UNCED 1992; UNFCCC 2015).

However, motherhood discourses have been strongly critiqued by scholars who argue that they are often essentialist in their tendency to connect womanhood with motherhood (Bretherton 2003; MacGregor 2006; Sandilands 1999). For example, Catriona Sandilands (1999, xiii) explains that in “motherhood environmentalism,” “women's concerns about nature, even if they have eventual public appearance and impact, boil down to an obvious manifestation of natural protective instincts towards home and family. It is all about threats to children and self-sacrifice for the sake of future generations.” In this understanding of environmentalism, women are first and foremost motivated by their identity as caregivers and only secondarily

as citizens, or nature enthusiasts, or justice seekers. Sherilyn MacGregor (2006) has critiqued these types of discourses (which she refers to as “eco-maternalism”) as reinforcing a pattern that does little to destabilize existing gender codes or enhance democracy. These gendered assumptions place women into a category of benevolent mothers who deserve respect, but not as active and informed citizens who have much to contribute to sustainability debates.¹ Along the same lines, the tendency to speak of “women and children” reflects a problematic, uncritical supposition about the inherent link between the position of women and that of children. Feminist scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (1990) argue that conflating the position and agency of women and children can serve to reinforce patronizing assumptions about women and undermine their well-being in cases where an instinct to “protect them” disenfranchises or marginalizes them in decision-making processes.

There is a tendency within much environmental scholarship and activism to characterize humanity as heterosexual and cisgender, a trend critiqued in fields such as queer ecology (Gaard 1997; Seymour 2013; Sturgeon 2008). For instance, Cameron Butler (2017, 271) calls attention to the mainstream sustainability movement as failing to confront heteronormativity (“the positioning of heterosexuality as natural and normal”), cissexism (“the conflating of gender and sex and positioning of cisgender people as natural and normal”), and reprocentricity (“the positioning of reproduction or procreation as being central to all people’s lives”). This strand of academic work problematizes or “queers” dominant conceptualizations of sustainability as well as care.² It challenges discourses that fail to acknowledge or address vulnerabilities faced by queer people around the globe. Additionally, it offers some alternative conceptualizations of care that reject a reprocentric criterion of earning care through reproductive potential and demonstrated usefulness (Seymour 2013).

PERCEPTIONS OF CARE

As seen in the scholarly literature, there are numerous ways the concept of care relates to environmental politics and action. Interviewees used several storylines related to the idea of care. First, humans might care about the

environment, meaning that we are concerned about environmental damage. Additionally, humans might care for the environment by working toward environmental sustainability. Finally, we might care for other humans when we assume a responsibility to support, protect, and aid them in ways that become more difficult in the face of environmental change. It is this last category that dominates the women-as-caregivers discourse, though there are important connections across all three.

This discourse was used fairly frequently by participants. Of the seventy-six women with whom I spoke, fifty-two used a women-as-caregivers discourse at some point in their responses.³ The majority of these specified the notion of women as mothers, while others reflected on care roles and climate change more generally. For instance, some used a women-provide-care-in-communities storyline to note the strong presence of women in activities such as community development and community-based environmental management. Elane, a nonprofit worker in the United States, stressed that this assumption about gender and community involvement has implications for development strategies. “Investors are more inclined to invest in women-based projects because they know that they will take the skills and they will nurture them and develop them and that they’re more likely to stay in their communities. And men will be more likely to leave their communities, families, and take the skills and go elsewhere. So, there’s this connection into strong development of the communities that is uniquely and typically gender-focused.” Elane thus argued that there is an assumption that women are most likely to be the ones who stick around and work within communities. The corresponding assumption that men will be the ones most likely to migrate because of environmental change finds some support in the academic literature (Obokata, Veronis, and McLeman 2014; Wrathall 2012); however, this is not always the case. In general, it is difficult to assign a single “cause” for migration. The reality is often much more complicated (Afifi 2011).⁴

Other storylines focus on women’s motivations for providing care and ways that they do so. Vicky, who works for an environmental organization in the UK, pondered the issue of how care expectations influence environmental action and even careers. She is an example of a participant who used a women-as-caregivers discourse quite frequently, yet never specifically

referred to motherhood or children. She commented that while her career path brought her to working on a community climate change project, this has not been the case for everyone from her environmental science courses:

I think women tend to be drawn more to working with people. Women are taught to care and just pay attention to individual situations. And I like working with people, and I see that as a way to make a difference rather than focusing on these, kind of, more abstract theoretical issues. But also, in my . . . work I'm surrounded by a lot of women who care about climate change and I've always found that interesting.

Her comment that “women are taught to care” indicates the socially constructed nature of care roles. She claims that while she has noticed large numbers of women in climate change spaces, but she attributes this more to the roles women are expected to play within society than to something inherent in them. These reflections illustrate a women-as-expected-to-care storyline.

In contrast, Constance, an academic in the United States, offered a very different explanation for why women might be motivated to get into her field of atmospheric science. In her words, “It’s always that idea that your maternal instincts come out. And this kind of work, you’re kind of almost looking to take care of everybody and fix everything.” Her argument that women are motivated by “maternal instinct” assumed a trait inherent in all women, even without their necessarily being mothers. This notion, as well as Constance’s description of women as being motivated “to take care of everybody,” was echoed by other participants who used a women-as-nurturing storyline. For example, Sarah, a US-based academic, said, “I think I’m more nurturing. . . . I’m on more graduate student committees than anyone else.”

It was more common for interviewees to describe women in general as nurturing. For instance, US-based academic Kristy said, “I feel like there are a lot of women who are interested in the environmental field, I mean, or at least environmental issues and sustainability issues, and so I don’t know, maybe it’s the more nurturing side.” Lydia is a US-based nonprofit worker who emphasized community and familial bonds, said:

I wouldn’t necessarily call myself a feminist, but as a female I do see [women] being able to take a . . . different approach for climate change issues from a more

nurturing perspective. And for some reason I see females as being able to be the ones that basically can open their arms to more people, be more inclusive to people because women somehow foster bonds between people because that's who we are. We're mothers, we're sisters. . . . Forming bonds . . . is something that we do—something that we're good at.

Lydia tied women's "nurturing perspective" to their ability to foster connections with people—something she regarded as necessary for effective climate change action. Annis, another US nonprofit worker, also argued that women's nurturing approach is necessary for solutions. She specifically noted that "women have an innate nurturing characteristic, a more gentle nature, a more community-minded connectedness to other people. And I think solutions are going to require that."

Other participants rejected this stereotype. Ivy, an academic in Canada, observed:

I have certainly noticed that the women that I talk to, very few of them tend to assert some kind of essentialist position, that, you know, women are inherently inclined to protect and nurture the environment, which I don't, you know, I don't agree with that position. And the majority of the women that I have interviewed . . . they do tend to have perhaps more of a critical perspective, they are much more critical of the chemicals that are being used, the pesticides, the herbicides, that sort of thing.

Ivy rejected essentialist representations of nurturing women while also indicating that she has not seen many women express this position in her work. She did notice gendered patterns in the agricultural communities she researches, but she links this to gender norms rather than biology. Likewise, US-based academic Kristy claimed, "I feel like it's very easy to slip into stereotypes, and I don't want to sound like I'm stereotyping people you know? I don't want to make it sound like all women are all, you know, touchy feely nurture people." What is noteworthy, though, is that both Ivy and Kristy acknowledged the widely held assumption that women are nurturing or that women play an oversized care role in society, even if they then reject or critique it. Many feminist environmental scholars have expressed frustration at the prevalence and persistence of these women-as-nurturers tropes

(Bretherton 2003; MacGregor 2006; Sandilands 1999), a topic discussed further below.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND PARENTING

For most interviewees, care roles in society revolve mostly around caring for children. There was very little reflection on caring for others, such as aging parents or other relatives, a fact that might bolster the claim of reproductivity within environmental action and scholarship. Some participants mentioned that women think differently about climate change after having children. This storyline was used to reflect on their own experiences or to describe women in the abstract. The claim is that because women tend to have the dominant caregiving role in most societies, they think about environmental change through this lens. For instance, Linda and Jessie, both advocates for children's health, reflected on how their role as mothers shapes their climate change work. Linda argued that having kids made her want to work harder on these issues. Jessie said that "as a mother it's a moral obligation to work for better health." She argued that she cared about the environment before she was a mother, but she thinks about it differently now. When she became a mother, she committed to protecting her child from dangers such as falling off chairs or other forms of physical harm. She viewed climate change as an overarching danger that she tries to protect her child from.

A related storyline is how climate change influences parenting. According to Sarah, an oceanographer working in the United States, "Being a woman and a mother makes you think differently." She noted that having her daughter "made me think more broadly" about the issue of climate change. She told a story about how depressing conversations about climate change between her and her husband (a climate scientist) have influenced their daughter. She referred to her child as traumatized by these discussions. Her daughter has told her that she does not want to have children of her own. This experience made Sarah realize that how caregivers talk about climate change to children matters.

Participants also tied climate change to parenting (and specifically mothering) through the idea of having a stake in the next generation. According to Ashley, a UK-based environmental ethics scholar:

I started thinking about parenting and climate change when I had children. You sort of start reflecting on things that relate to yourself in some ways. I think yeah . . . working on climate change and having a stake in the next generation, the combination can be quite stressful.

Similarly, in response to the question “What comes to mind when you hear the phrase ‘gender and climate change?’” Kylie, an ecology and religion professor in the United States, had the following to say

I think there can also be the concern of a mother, about what the future will be of her children, and certainly concern for children is not necessarily gendered, but often times women have a larger role in caring for and educating their children. And I think giving birth to a child creates a particular connection to the future, a visceral symbiotic action that I was completely unaware of until I went through that experience. And so, I think that could be another aspect of gender and climate change or women and climate change. Just really having the very visceral investment in the future well-being of children.

For Kylie, the physical act of giving birth made her uniquely aware of the connection between this generation and the next. While others were less explicit about the physical nature of motherhood, they too reflected on the long-term implications of climate change impacts through their own lens of being a caregiver.

WOMEN’S CAREGIVING AND CLIMATE ACTION

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is that motherhood or the role of caregiving might make women more conscious of climate change and more likely to get involved in climate change mitigation or adaptation work. This is a women-as-aware-and-involved storyline. Aida, an environmental engineer based in the United States, said that “I guess in the ‘women are nurturing’ type way then they may care more to do what they can . . . or do their part [to address climate change].” Like some interviewees discussed above, Aida attributes women’s motivation to engage in climate change action to their being “nurturing.” Additionally, Elane, who works in the environmental nonprofit sector in the United States, argued that in her experience, mothers

are more likely to get involved because they have first-hand knowledge of possible adverse consequences of climate change for their children:

I think also that you have women who are, when you talk about pollution, I think . . . women tend to be more vocal advocates on behalf of their children. I think that some of the moms inspiring grass-root organizations that have been incredibly effective are frequent mothers-out-front who have wanted to ensure that their children have clean air or clean water . . . who are the ones most likely to take their kids to the pediatricians for asthma attacks . . . who know intimately or are more likely to stay home with their children when they're sick. So, there is this particular interest in focus that I think when you inform and educate women about these issues, you have a tremendous group of advocates on your side to really champion real solutions.

Elane uses the term “advocates” to describe women as mothers and mothers as agents for climate change action.

This sentiment was also brought up by Haley, who works for a US solar energy nonprofit and reflected on her own position as an expectant mother:

I think, and part of this is me speaking as somebody that's an expectant mother, the older I get . . . the more real it becomes for me. Just from the simple fact of, you know, it's our future and it's our kids' future. And I know from speaking with other women, a lot of them feel the same way. It's a stereotype that women are more empathetic or sympathetic towards these sort of causes, but I think there is some truth to it. When we look at, “okay well, we have families and we're bringing kids into the world.” And that's not to say that dads don't feel the same way, but when you're looking at who is actually motivated to spend their time volunteering or working on a campaign that's going to affect climate change, everybody has a motivation, and I think moms are people that are connected to their kids, which tends to be a lot of females.

According to this perspective, women are potentially more likely to get involved in climate change causes because of their role as mothers. While Haley, along with other participants, acknowledged that fathers also care about their kids' future, she indicated that there is something unique about what motivates mothers. Ginnie mentioned that of the sixteen thousand people who have taken part in her environmental organization's affordable

energy programs in the UK, around ten thousand were women. She reasoned, “I guess that’s because women are more likely to ask for help, or women are more likely to attend groups. . . . So, a big group of people who are vulnerable to poverty are people who have got young children and single moms. So, we do a lot of family work, in terms of women who come to those groups.” This association between climate change and parenting certainly played into the path of Kate in her work with an environmental nonprofit in the United States. She explained:

I was sitting at home and I was feeling really nervous about climate change in general, and I felt very isolated because I have two small children. And so, I started looking online for . . . I might have Googled like “good news climate” or something like that. And I feel like I was a little nervous and scared and I fumbled upon the page for our organization and I just started volunteering. I think they pegged me as the joiner that I am and I feel like it was an event where I showed up to volunteer, they were like “Hey, do you like this? Do you want to do this?” So that’s kind of how I landed in this world.

She went on to say that thinking about the enormity of climate change made her feel “hopeless” and that she hated feeling that way, “especially as a mom.” That is what ultimately drove her to get involved in her environmental organization. Sharon, who works in the US environmental nonprofit sector, brought up this trend of women using motherhood discourses to identify their own sustainability actions. “Not to say that there aren’t some great men out there who are full believers,” she said. “But, it’s just to me [. . . I see a lot more women using that messaging in their own explanation of why they care about the issue.”

Paige, a nonprofit worker from the UK, was one of the interviewees who pushed back against the assumption that “caregiver” automatically means “mother”:

One of the things I think I get cautious about is the assumption that women care more because women are caregivers and mothers. I always think that’s a little bit over-simplistic. I think fathers care just as much about the children as women do. Although I think you do tend to see possibly slightly more, both in our work, for women having more collective concern. We often see a lot of

women coming forward for community-based projects. They have a heightened sense of community responsibility. . . . They seem to see it as more their responsibility to make sure everyone is ok.

Although Paige recognized that men also care about their children, she reinforced the sentiments expressed above that (1) it is still women who are more likely to take action on climate change by working on nonprofit campaigns and the like, and (2) women still assume (or are expected to assume) care roles for the community. Meg, a nonprofit worker in the United States, argued that this has been her experience in her work on climate change issues. In her view, women are motivated to try to save the planet for their family and friends, while men are motivated to save it for “the glory.” While participants who used the women-provide-care storyline differed in whether they saw this as because of society’s expectations or because of something inherent in women, they all argued that there are gendered patterns in who shows up for climate action and why.⁵

Caregiving and Health

Participants noted that gendered expectations result in women having the primary responsibility for addressing the health consequences of climate change for families. Effects of climate change, such as a lack of safe drinking water and food, poor sanitation, more frequent extreme weather events, a lack of shelter, changes in exposure to toxic chemicals, and population migration (Rylander, Odland, and Sandanger 2013; Sheffield and Landrigan 2011; Watts 2015), lead to a range of adverse health consequences, including changing disease patterns and morbidity. Women (especially pregnant women), babies, and children are among the groups that are particularly vulnerable to several negative health effects of climate change (Watts 2015).⁶ Recent work estimates that climate change impacts were responsible for more than 150,000 deaths worldwide in 2000. Of these climate-related deaths, 88 percent were children (Sheffield and Landrigan 2011). Scholars identify links between natural disasters and malnutrition as well as disease in pregnant women, infants, and children (Rylander, Odland, and Sandanger 2013). Other research focuses on issues such as water salinity and maternal health (Khan et al. 2011), higher temperatures and low birth weight (Deschênes,

Greenstone, and Guryan 2009; Ngo and Horton 2016), and agricultural changes and low birth weight (Bakhtsiyarava, Grace, and Nawrotzki 2018).

A few interviewees reflected on these connections by discussing health, air quality, and climate change. Asthma and other allergic airway diseases are a serious threat to global public health. The rates of these conditions have increased dramatically since the late 1990s and are predicted to worsen with the advancement of climate change (D’Amato et al. 2015; Sheffield and Landrigan 2011). It is estimated that over 300 million people worldwide are currently affected. According to the World Allergy Organization, greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have already warmed the planet significantly, “causing more severe and prolonged heat waves, variability in temperature, increased air pollution, forest fires, droughts, and floods—all of which can put the respiratory health of the public at risk. These changes in climate and air quality have a measurable impact not only on the morbidity but also the mortality of patients with asthma and other respiratory diseases” (D’Amato et al. 2015, 1). One interview participant, Jessie, said that she has already witnessed the impact of poor air quality on women’s time commitments through her work with an environmental nonprofit. She argued that when kids have asthma, mothers are typically the ones to care for them. While she said that she is happy to perform this role in her family, she also recognized that it could have negative consequences on her job and other commitments. “When my daughter is sick, it’s me who stays home. . . . Women, we bear the brunt of it.” Her response focuses on women’s double roles as mothers and workers. It reveals a tension between the gendered divisions of labor in many families and women’s paid labor, as women are still primarily expected to complete a great deal of unpaid labor (UNDP 2015).

Jasmine, a US environmental scientist in the US, and reflected on gendered experiences of climate change in terms of climate change–related health problems for pregnant women.

I think also reproductively. [The] Zika virus outbreak shed some light on that. I think with climate change we have these disease vectors that expand and spread and . . . women have to deal with those consequences if they’re infected with, like, the Zika virus. . . . [We] bear the brunt of taking care of children. And also . . . you see a lot of policies like “Oh, women have to refrain from having sex” or

like “refrain from having children” because of this disease that’s possibly being spread due to climate change. But no policies are really targeted towards men.

These comments call attention to the ways that climate change impacts pregnant women’s bodies, but also the expectation that women’s bodies are an acceptable site for policy attention, while men’s are not (Detraz 2017b; Hartmann 2010).

Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Women’s Labor

Interviewees often used the women-as-caregivers and women-as-vulnerable discourses in tandem to stress that women’s unique vulnerability to climate change intersects with their expected care roles in a women’s-environmental-and-care-labor storyline. They pointed out that many women, particularly those in economically precarious positions, feel the impacts of climate change through reduced access to water, energy, and food, which in turn influences their education, livelihood, and health. These factors compound existing inequalities within their societies, including reinforcing gendered roles such as unequal divisions of household and community labor (Alston 2011; Arora-Jonsson 2011; Dankelman 2010). Interviewees noted that climate change that adversely impacts water and food availability (access and cost) and the health of family members will likely result in additional unpaid work for women. Farhana, an environmental nonprofit worker in the UK, reflected on this in the context of her recent visit to Bangladesh for her organization. She recounted the struggle of women to grow crops and food as well as provide safe housing for their families in the aftermath of Cyclone Aila. Her responses frequently invoked the idea of women, and specifically mothers, working to overcome the challenges triggered by natural disasters.

One interesting facet of discussions of women’s labor that emerged in the interviews is the idea of emotional labor that often falls on women’s shoulders, a women’s-emotional-burden storyline. Brenda mentioned this in the context of worrying about the impacts of climate change in general:

I think there is a component of mental health that we don’t talk about very much related to climate change and I think that women probably bear a lot of the brunt of that because they take care of a kind of emotional . . . they do the emotional labor of maintaining a household and maintaining children and thinking about the future of children and more probably than men do,

on average. And I think that experience of climate change or looming climate change, because I think, probably, in the moment you're dealing with whatever crisis is in front of you and everybody's dealing with it in the same way, but if you're focusing on what may happen in the future or what will happen in the future, that is probably more on the shoulders of women than of men.

Likewise, Sina, a nonprofit worker in the United States, sketched these connections through a discussion of food security and psychological burden of women. She claimed that since women are “the backbone of the family” and tasked primarily with taking care of children, they have to worry about possible food shortages spurred by climate change. “I think in terms of psychology; it is affecting the women more as they experience that.” Sina repeated this storyline tying women's care duties and increased vulnerability to a psychological toll of climate change: Usually, the women are very concerned about the future of their children—so, like, “This is what is going to happen, and I don't want my children to face that kind of condition. So, what should I do to change that, or to minimize that? . . . They're the one who is psychologically impacted.” In addition to noting this psychological or emotional burden on caregivers, she also argued that “because they're very concerned and care for their family, they're the ones who . . . actively offer themselves to either to learn or to do something.” Like several other participants, she said that this care role leads women to become more involved in trying to address environmental problems such as climate change.

Emotional labor even came up in the context of who performs what tasks in an office full of climate change activists. Swati argued that women are the ones “who tend to play the caretakers, like making sure there are birthday cards for people, making sure the kitchen is clean, making sure that if someone is leaving there is a going away party, things like that—that's not in any of our job descriptions, and the men kind of . . . it just happens, so why would they ever have to step up?” These reflections on gendered divisions of labor in society and families⁷ were one of the first things most participants mentioned in response to the question “What do you think of when you hear the phrase ‘gender and climate change?’”

Some participants reflected on the negative implications of gender stereotypes for both women and men who are taking action on climate change.

They indicated that even though thinking about climate change takes a serious emotional toll, men may not feel as comfortable talking about or expressing this aspect of their work. Participants such as Swati and Janice said that women in their office will cry tears of both joy and sadness but the men in their office do not cry in front of the group. Janice observed:

I think that the women will talk more about the loss, actually verbalize this experience of loss, but I do not in any way think that that means that the men are not experiencing it at all. And in fact, given that men have sort of overarching sense of responsibility, I actually think that the men, for men, their pain may be more extreme even than ours. Because we talk about it, and we cry. Whereas I see them just look stricken and helpless, and this is the dynamic of working in climate is you can't be hopeless, you can't be hopeless.

For Janice, gender stereotypes in climate change work result in men being unable to express the significant emotional toll of climate struggles. Scholars have documented similar trends in the aftermath of disasters, when men are often depicted by the media as stoic and resourceful and women are portrayed as tearful victims (Emmanuel and Enarson 2012; Enarson and Morrow 1998). They argue that this portrayal is damaging, as men are denied the space or ability to be emotional in the aftermath of natural hazards. Scholars have also reflected on this trend within environmentalism in general, with certain forms of masculinity necessitating a sense or at least a projection of control (Norgaard 2011). This version of stoic masculinity may also relate to some participants feeling unable to express emotion in the spaces of science. In such a traditionally male-dominated sphere that prizes objectivity, displays of emotion are understood to be taboo—at least they have been in the past. In her work on gender and water, Farhana Sultana (2011, 164) says that emotions are an essential component of environmental issues. Scholars can assess “the multiplicity of ways that emotions are not feminine, but are constituted as a result of spaces, places, bodies, and experiences.” What is problematic is that many societies in the global North have come to associate emotion—a human experience—with femininity. They have also come to regard the display of emotion as something unprofessional or uncomfortable. Grief, loss, and fear of climate change are obviously a very real aspect

of climate change work for the majority of these participants. Likewise, there is an ever-expanding academic literature on climate change's impacts on mental health (Berry, Bowen, and Kjellstrom 2010; Bourque and Willox 2014; Cunsolo and Ellis 2018; Obradovich et al. 2018; Searle and Gow 2010). It is essential that people be given the tools to acknowledge and process the feelings that accompany climate change while also working to address the gendered material and structural challenges presented by climate change. This is particularly important for those who spend a great deal of time thinking about the topic.

WOMEN AND POPULATION GROWTH

Another important thing to note is how the women-as-caregivers discourse gets connected to the drivers of climate change in population discussions, a women-as-child-bearers storyline. This has been a high-profile and controversial topic since the 1960s (Cripps 2015; Detraz 2017a; Foster 2017; Sasser 2018) and going back centuries through Malthusian concerns about population growth, food insecurity, and environmental change. Women's fertility gets linked to the causes of climate change, but also to human vulnerability and lack of women's empowerment. In policy documents such as reports from the IPCC, reducing fertility is presented as a "health co-benefit of climate change mitigation measures" (IPCC 2014c, 742). That is, it is a win-win: women's health is improved at the same time that greenhouse gas emissions are reduced. This is consistent with the treatment of population growth discussions in *Agenda 21* and other high-profile environmental sources (Foster 2017; Sasser 2018).

The topic of population growth came up a few times in the interviews and closely echoed the themes above. In one instance, it was brought up by Ashley, an environmental ethics scholar, who was working on a project on population and climate justice. She asserted that when you examine the "link between population growth and climate change, then you start thinking about women's empowerment, or lack thereof, and how that's a key factor in both." Ginnie, who works for an environmental organization in the UK, similarly cast this discussion in terms of women's empowerment:

If women were educated or had the contraceptives available, then they would have control over their family planning. And so unplanned pregnancies would, you wouldn't have as many of them, so that gives control back to the women which might be a benefit for their life in terms of being able to get an education or moving further into their career. And in terms of climate change impacts, having a child is one of the most impactful things you can do so if we can sort of have win-win scenarios where you're educating women, having controlled families, then maybe population growth might be checked and then resources might be better managed.

Both of these participants saw women's empowerment as an important way both to mitigate climate change because of their status as child bearers and to improve their position in society. Likewise, many in the international development sector use a similar population, environmental health, and empowerment frame. According to population scholars like Jade Sasser (2018, 2) this approach typically contains an implicit assumption that actors in the global North will be involved in providing poor women around the world with universal, voluntary access to contraceptives and education opportunities, which will enable them to "make decisions about their childbearing in ways that affirm their human rights while benefiting the environment by decreasing human numbers. In this schema, fewer people will consume resources and use polluting technologies, relieving pressure on the earth and its atmosphere." However, many scholars critique this emphasis on altering women's fertility as a means to some other end (Hartmann 2010; Ojeda et al. 2020). It is different from a specific, unique concern about women's reproductive health. There are plenty of discourses oriented around a particular focus on ways to foster greater social and health outcomes for women around the world. These discourses center the wants and needs of women as the goal in and of itself rather than linking it to global concerns about environmental sustainability, overpopulation, or resource use. They respond to the very real need for maternal, infant, and childhood health services as well as poverty reduction and family planning services in countries in both the global South and the global North.

In contrast to focusing on women's empowerment, Kate, a children's health advocate in the United States, rejected elements of the debate that she viewed as blaming women's fertility for environmental damage:

I feel like sometimes . . . the finger gets pointed toward people who have decided to have children, and how that possibly is contributing to climate change and the use of resources and things like that. . . . I don't think that is fair in a way, because I feel like in society men and women have become the ultimate consumers. Both genders consume at rapid rates whether there are children involved or not, and I don't think that one consumes more than the other.

For Kate, consumption is a more central concern than population, and both men and women engage in consumption. While the storyline of women-as-consumers will be taken up in chapter 6, it is important to point out that here it was used in ways specifically connected to discussions of population growth. Another example comes from Nicola, a US-based environmental nonprofit worker, in talking about changes in her thinking about having children. She said that she did not intend to have children for a long time because it seemed like a responsible choice “to not bring another consumer into the world.” Over time, she began to consider whether having a child meant that she “could bring a positive change into the world” by raising someone “who could continue the work that is needed to, sort of, transform our society away from a capitalist consumer society into one based on . . . justice and sustainability.” She said that she began to think about “how it isn't black and white in terms of having kids being just another, sort of, suck on our resources or toll on our resources. But a potential solution to the challenges that we're facing.” This transformation in her thinking hinged on her reflecting on the power of parents to guide their children, rather than all humans just being consumers.

These personal decisions about whether to have children were mentioned by other interviewees as well. Brittany, a nonprofit worker in the UK, posited that since women are the ones who birth children, they are the ones who most immediately deal with questions about whether to have children or how many children to have. She also pointed out that population is something that is not discussed a great deal, at least in her experience.

It's quite uncomfortable. Quite an uncomfortable thing to talk about, what would life with your children be in the future? And whether it's then right for you to have children anyway because of that, and because of that contribution

to future society. I think it's an uncomfortable topic for people to talk about—it's not, like, free and easy.

Sharon said that she has heard uneasy conversations in her US-based environmental organization about whether women, including herself, were planning to have children. In addition to the strangeness of discussing extremely personal choices with colleagues or acquaintances, such a conversation takes on a totally different character among environmentalists since population has been so firmly linked to environmental debates since the 1960s and earlier.

USING MOTHERHOOD/CARE DISCOURSES STRATEGICALLY

While caregiver discourses are often used to indicate a specific form of vulnerability for women, in some instances they are invoked strategically to get people to care about the future marked by climate change. For instance, Mary Robinson and comedian Maeve Higgins launched a climate change-themed podcast in 2018 called “Mothers of Invention.” Robinson, the former president of Ireland, is well known in the international community for work on social justice and environmental issues. In introducing the all-female series, Robinson explained that “climate change is a manmade problem that requires a feminist solution. . . . What we are hoping to do is create a movement. Climate change is not gender-neutral—it affects women far more. So, this is not about climate change, it is about climate justice” (quoted in Harvey 2018). The title of the podcast is a play on the often-used phrase, but it also relates to existing social expectations about motherhood being a common feature of women's lived experiences. Additionally, numerous environmental organizations use the theme of caregiving or parenthood. While some climate change and general environmental organizations tap into parenting discourses more generally (e.g., Climate Parents, Parents Roar, Canadian Parents for Climate Action, Grands-Parents pour le Climat), others are specifically mom-themed. These include Moms Clean Air Force, Cool Mom, Mothers Out Front, The Mother's Project, and Climate Mama. These organizations boast a million members collectively. Kelsey Wirth, the founder of Mothers Out Front, has said in interviews that she regards the organization of

mothers into an activated constituency to be no less than reinvigorating to our democracy (Wroth 2016).

This trend of strategically using motherhood or care narratives has long been implemented by women activists. In countries such as the United States, middle- and upper-class women have often participated in environmental initiatives and evoked the image of motherly duties. During the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century, women's clubs used the frames of motherhood or household needs to put forth the claim that they were naturally inclined with the experience and temperament necessary to clean up their communities and the country. These frames also fit societal expectations about the appropriate role for women and thereby allowed them to engage in activism without presenting a radical challenge to gender norms.

Although the clubs were segregated by race, both white and Black women's clubs drew on motherhood narratives in their activism, albeit in slightly different fashions. Black clubwomen "drew on the legacy of Black women's roles as 'othermothers' and caretakers of the entire community" (Stover and Cable 2017, 688). Harkening back to times of slavery and decades after when Black families were often separated and Black women cared for the children of other women, clubwomen presented themselves as caretakers of rapidly expanding urban communities (Stover and Cable 2017). These types of socially salient narratives continued to accompany women's participation in the proliferation of environmental activism in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in environmental justice-focused organizations.

My interviewees argued that people are much more receptive to messages about climate change when it is discussed in terms they can relate to. This response came up repeatedly in interviews with those who work in environmental nonprofits in particular. Brenda, for instance, explained that she sometimes uses images of people's past and their children's future to get them to connect with the idea of climate change in her work in Seattle, Washington:

We want our children to see the Washington that we find so special. We want our children to be able to go up to the mountains and see snow in the winter-time. We want our children to go, to be able to go out to the beaches and see the sea stars and see the, you know, gather oysters, or whatever. You know, all of the things that climate change is impacting. . . . So, those are the arguments

that we have found are the most resonant with people who don't necessarily automatically . . . who aren't already believers in climate change.

Meg, another nonprofit worker in the United States, also used the argument that "I care about preserving this earth, my grandchildren need it. I don't have children, I don't know if I ever will, but I think it's something that I use because it's an easy connection." Meg's is a clear example of using caregiving, and in this case motherhood, storylines strategically to encourage people to "feel" climate change on a personal level.

Other participants talked about ways their US-based environmental organizations think about connecting with mothers as a group. Sarah argued that they needed to bring in mothers who are active in their children's schools and to make them more aware that climate change is important for everyone. Janice explained that mothers are among the "unconventional spokespeople" about environmental issues because they are believable. She noted that people in meetings she attends will argue that "We need to get mothers involved. They care, you know, about the future of their children. Which is not to say that fathers don't, but women will talk more perhaps in that way." Rachel, likewise, referred to harnessing "the power of mothers":

You can't really say bad things about mothers, right? A political bloc, or . . . I don't mean voting-wise, but just a group of people who could stand up and be respected. That comes to mind because I know about that . . . I've been in a couple other meetings with . . . women activists, women business leaders, . . . who are just asking the question "Can women as a group play a larger role in, or a different role, in climate solutions?"

Here, the belief that mothers are irreproachable means that they can "stand up and be respected." In societies across the world such beliefs might explain why motherhood discourses are prevalent in various kinds of activism, such as peace and anti-militarism (Carreon and Moghadam 2015; El-Bushra 2007; Gentry 2009). Movements that challenge a fundamental element of society (e.g., capitalism or militarism) can be "softened" through presenting it as something nonthreatening (Logsdon-Conradson 2011). The same holds for appealing to femininity and motherhood discourses in particular in order to "sell" a wide group of people on climate change action. For instance,

Haley mentioned a female civil engineer she knows who wound up in the solar industry:

She has kind of embraced this role as a “solar mom.” I know, it’s funny . . . because the first time I heard that I thought that was kind of offensive cause it’s a pigeonhole type term. Like, “Why would you want to be a solar mom?” It is representative of this more welcoming attitude that the solar advocacy, or advocacy in general, does have toward women and mothers.

Although the solar industry’s desire to seem welcoming can be viewed as a positive strategic move, the strategy might reinforce gender norms about who is most likely to perform care roles, a topic taken up in the next section.⁸

Interviewees from the nonprofit sector outlined other strategies they employ to soften their message about climate change, including refraining from using the term “climate change.” Some told me they frame their message as being about children’s health rather than climate change because this is seen as less threatening. Sharon is an environmental nonprofit worker in the United States and described the issue this way:

So [my organization’s] whole thing is really climate change, I mean we are trying to fight that, but because we work in the Southeast [United States] we don’t call it “climate change” all the time because that turns a lot of people’s ears off real fast, especially in the utilities sector. There are a lot of people holding on to the false notion that climate change is fake. . . . We focus more on the health benefits of decreasing carbon-intense resources. So, for example, not only are coal plants emitting carbon, but there’s a bunch of other bad things both in the air and water. And so, a lot of time we will partner with health-based advocacy groups to talk about, you know, closing this coal plant will clean up the air for asthma kids.

Her remarks illustrate the strategic necessity of using frames that will both resonate with her organization’s intended audience and avoid turning them off from the topic of clean energy. One tactic has been to partner with some of the parent-themed organizations discussed above to frame climate change mitigation as a children’s public health issue.

In sum, the women-as-caregivers discourse contains storylines that focus on care in multiple contexts. Participants used the discourse to highlight women’s roles of providing care for communities, as well as care within their

own families. They discussed ways that women are taught to provide care, as well as whether women are instinctively nurturing. They reflected on their own identity as caregivers, or potential caregivers, and how climate change has shaped their identities. At the same time, they pondered how parenting influences climate change action. The discourse contains storylines that depict caregiving and motherhood as part of what influences how we understand climate change, how we act to address climate change, and even how we frame climate change to others in both personal and professional capacities.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN-AS-CAREGIVERS DISCOURSE

What is climate change in the women-as-caregivers discourse? Climate change is a phenomenon that influences daily lives and experiences—including parenting and other care roles. It is a force that makes care work more difficult. It makes people sick. It makes resources more costly or otherwise difficult to acquire. Climate change is also a force that influences perceptions and mental health. It is noticeable when we provide care. It expands time horizons by highlighting connections to future generations. It results in an emotional toll as humans grieve for what will be lost to future generations and worry about what harm will befall this one. But climate change is also a space for advocacy and action to ensure that children and communities are as healthy and safe as they can be. Across the discourse, climate change is a phenomenon that shapes labor as well as perspective. It is not only an external, empirical fact but also a deeply personal force.

The international community has been grappling with how to think about women and/in environmentalism at least since the early 1990s. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Rio Earth Summit, resulted in the international community adopting the concept of sustainable development to address environmental change while simultaneously recognizing a goal of economic development, particularly for the global South. The widely read accompanying document, *Agenda 21*, set out a plan of action for how states and other actors could (and should) make sustainable development a reality. The text specifically included

a call for greater inclusion of marginalized groups, including women, youth, and indigenous communities. These groups were portrayed as living or being closer to the natural environment and therefore instrumental to pursuing environmental sustainability. Women in particular were depicted as reproductive mothers with a high degree of vulnerability and a strong capacity for environmental care (Bretherton 2003). Emma Foster (2017, 222) explains that in documents such as *Agenda 21*, “Women are constructed as closer to nature and the body—and separate from men, culture, and the mind—and therefore it follows that the environment is an obvious policy domain for women’s decision-making ‘abilities.’” In these treatments, solutions “to environmental problems were seen as requiring a more ‘naturally caring’ individual who had a greater investment in saving the planet for future generations due to her investment in child-bearing and child-rearing.”

Where are the women in this discourse? They are in the global North and global South—in homes preparing food and caring for sick children. They are in communities working on climate change initiatives or engaging in gendered labor. Who are the women? They are cisgendered women whose biological relationship to care is not often challenged by their societies. They are caregivers and those who are concerned about the fate of their family, community, and planet. Their care roles motivate them to be active in climate change or sustainability initiatives. While some depictions of women in the discourse cast them as instinctively “nurturing,” there was some evidence of self-reflection on the part of some participants about the socially constructed aspect of women’s care roles. Nicola, an environmental nonprofit worker in the United States, stopped herself in the middle of the interview and said that she did not want to “put women into traditional gender roles” by talking about motherhood and care. She went on to explain that she understands the complexities surrounding this role or identity because it is a mix of social construction (we are socialized to think of women as the primary caregivers) and lived experience for many women. Sharon, also a US-based nonprofit worker, had a similar approach: I always come back to the woman as caregiver, even though that’s such a stereotype and I don’t want to at all say that men aren’t caregivers, but I think about historically who has been caregivers. . . . I think about the women that will still be in charge of

the kids and still be trying to figure out what to do with their family. Sharon recognized that she is using a stereotype and acknowledged that men also play caregiving roles. Yet she argued that past and current gendered divisions of labor often result in women having a lived experience of providing care.

While there is often pushback against homogenized ideas of women as nurturing or caregivers, it is also crucial to focus more on why men tend *not* to be expected to be nurturing, at least not in the same ways as women. Some interviewees raised the question of whether having more people “care” about the environment and other humans could potentially be a path forward to addressing climate change. Darcy, an academic in the United States, connected this to gender roles specifically, saying “men are socialized in society surely to have less sensitivity or care for an exploitable other. So, I think that that surely plays a huge explanatory role in why we’re in the crisis that we’re in right now.” In this view, a lack of care for others shapes behavior in ways that are detrimental to the environment. This sentiment is also expressed by Shea, an environmental attorney in the United States, who observed:

I hate to make nurturing into the feminine thing because it’s so traditional and so stereotypical and is not true for a lot of women, but there’s this nurturing aspect of, I think this nurturing piece is missing. I think one reason folks are detached from the issue of climate change is because they actually can’t relate to it. Folks want to care about the air they breathe, this or that plant species, but they can’t really. The language we use does not encourage this kind of development of a relationship with the environment. It encourages mainly “here’s a problem, now we have to fix it” kind of attitude.

She highlighted that nurturing and care are two concepts that necessarily connect with people’s attitudes on climate change and relationship with the environment. For both Shea and Darcy, societal attitudes with regard to care shape whether and how individuals are likely to act to address climate change. While Shea did not specifically talk about men or masculinity, Darcy indicated that the question of who cares and who does not is socially conditioned. It is not about who is most capable of providing care, but rather who is expected to do so. It is likely that the more people are encouraged to think outside of themselves—of those who are vulnerable to climate change,

of species that are harmed by human activities—the more they would act to avoid the worst of climate change from occurring. In this view, caregiving is not some feminized task that women must think past, but rather it is a powerful reframing of environmental concerns that might result in sustainability and justice. In this way, a critical climate change and caregiving discourse can allow for the language and space to think about responsibilities and sustainability in meaningful and transformational ways (Whyte and Cuomo 2016). There are potential opportunities for utilizing expansive care discourses beyond the existing strategic use of maternalist storylines to reflect on climate change, a theme that will be expanded in the concluding chapter.

While the women-as-vulnerable discourse described in chapter 3 was almost exclusively used to think about women “in the developing world,” participants used caregiver/motherhood storylines to reflect on their own experiences, those of women around them, and global patterns of gendered caregiving. Providing care or feeling a responsibility to care were depicted as common to women common across societies. As mentioned previously, participants provided different explanations for why women tend to provide care, but they conceived this as a phenomenon that transcends North/South boundaries. For these reasons, it is important to recognize the fact that motherhood/care discourse continues to be used to describe women’s connection to environmental issues. The reasons for this are likely numerous and complex. The women whom I interviewed are products of societies that still tend to associate women with care. They are living and working in societies where women still have an unequal care burden relative to men (Bittman et al. 2003; Coffey et al. 2020; Schaeffer 2019) and where that burden is expected to grow heavier because of climate change impacts on disease and resource availability.

What are some of the obstacles as well as opportunities associated with framing women’s involvement in climate change and other environmental issues through a specific focus on motherhood or caregiving? In terms of obstacles, feminist critiques point to the ways that environmental discourses that build on motherhood images are rife with homogenization and are quite likely to narrow understandings of environmental issues in ways that are detrimental to goals of both sustainability and justice (Bretherton 2003;

Butler 2017; MacGregor 2006; Perkins 2012 Sandilands 1999; Seymour 2013). Lois Gibbs, for instance, is one of the most recognizable names in the history of the US environmental justice movement. In 1978, she discovered that her son's school and the surrounding housing development was built on top of a toxic waste dump. She became a key leader in efforts to relocate the people of Love Canal who were impacted by toxic waste. Her efforts, along with the mostly female other members of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, helped to both push for stronger commitments to sustainability and environmental justice at the US Environmental Protection Agency, as well as raise awareness and action to address toxic exposure in homes. Despite her groundbreaking activism in this area, the media and public discourse centered on her role as a mother. "The perception was that her environmental activism was motivated primarily by her concerns about the contamination of the house and related threats to her children's health" (Sze 2017, 162). Media reports deemed her a "hysterical housewife" (Blum 2008; Seager 1996). These depictions ignored her agency as a person and focused solely on her position as a mother, while simultaneously repeating a "women are overly emotional" stereotype to belittle her actions (Perkins 2012; Sze 2017). Similarly, one participant I spoke to, Linda, explained that some of the politicians she interacts with treat her dismissively during the course of her work on child's health advocacy in the United States. She feels the need to convince them that she "isn't just a bored housewife who is doing this," but that she understands the science behind it and is making sound arguments about policy. The potential for the women-as-caregivers discourse to feed into tropes about women as overly emotional mothers necessitates thinking critically about care and environmental change frames.

At the same time, queer ecology argues that environmentalism's reproductivity, cissexism, and heteronormativity result in a limited and potentially damaging conceptualization of care—both for people and the planet (Butler 2017; Seymour 2013). Scholars highlight the overwhelming concern for "future generations" in mainstream environmentalism as evidence of this reproductivity wherein sustainability becomes linked to (re)productive potential (Seymour 2013). The public health crises that are often used to raise awareness of unsustainability are those that threaten the lives of mothers and

children (Sturgeon 2008). Health concerns for communities regarded as less sympathetic (groups you can say bad things about) are typically missing in attempts to get people and policymakers to care about environmental issues.

An additional problem is that focusing on women as child bearers can result in them being seen as, at least partially, responsible for environmental change. The IPCC (2014b, 4), for instance, has specifically mentioned population growth as contributing to climate change.⁹ There is a great deal of scholarship outlining the various instances of states enacting population control measures on women's bodies, particularly marginalized women (Cripps 2015; Hartmann 2010; Nelson 2003; Sasser 2018). For example, it is estimated that in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s thousands of women underwent forced sterilization. A large number of these women were Black, Native American, and Latina (Nelson 2003). While the idea of states addressing climate change by curtailing women's reproductive freedoms might seem a bit extreme to some of us, this has been the historical reality of marginalized communities when their society becomes convinced that population reduction is necessary. In a less extreme example, maternalist discourses can also exert additional pressure on women's reproductive choices at a personal level (Detraz 2021). Linking women with motherhood may result in pushing women to alter an important life choice in the name of sustainability. Rarely is the decision to become a father cast in the same terms.

One major critique of motherhood or caregiver frames is that they essentialize the category of "women" into a simplistic, homogenous entity. While participants mostly avoided conflating the positions of women and of children, there were instances of essentialization across the interviews. Some of this language was akin to early academic and activist versions of ecofeminism. The term "ecofeminism" traces back to 1974, when French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne used the word *ecoféminisme* to highlight women's action as necessary to save the planet. In later years, many scholars and activists use the term "ecofeminist" to refer to their efforts to link feminism and ecology. While ecofeminism covers many approaches to connecting feminist concerns and environmental concerns (Mies and Shiva 1993; Warren 1997), initial versions of the concept have been criticized for putting forth an essentialized depiction of women as caregivers of the planet (Sandilands 1999).

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to dismiss caregiver storylines as always detrimental. I was fairly surprised by the frequency of the women-as-caregivers discourse in the interviews. I went into this project with a strong understanding of the feminist critiques of essentialist versions of ecofeminism, motherhood environmentalism, and eco-maternalism. However, some version of a caregiver/motherhood storyline kept appearing as I interviewed more and more women. Women were described as “nurturing,” “the carers,” and “the first point of contact in the home.” While I agree with those critical voices who reject homogenized depictions of women and care (Detraz 2017b), I also find it interesting and important that a women-as-caregivers discourse was used by women working on climate change issues to understand their own position as well as general concerns about climate change. Many interviewees shared very personal reflections about what being a mother or caregiver meant for their feelings about and work on climate change. The women-as-caregivers discourse gave them the storylines to share this part of their identity and experience. What is noteworthy is that many women see their role as a mother, or the role of caregiver in general, as a vital component of their existence. And what becomes significant is how this discourse might be influencing current conceptualizations of climate change. Scholars and practitioners must grapple with how to avoid essentialization and representing women in ways that are likely to reduce them to “hysterical housewives” with little to say about public concerns, while also recognizing that caregiving and motherhood form an intimate part of many people’s identities and relationships to environmental concerns. It is undoubtedly true that there are considerable problems with dichotomous understandings of women as emotional and caring on one hand and men as rational and stoic on the other, but it is also true that all of the interviewees who used a motherhood/care discourse also used other discourses that signal women’s expertise, ingenuity, resilience, and agency. We turn to these storylines next.

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Women and Climate Change

Examining Discourses from the Global North

By: Nicole Detraz

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