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6 WOMEN AS AGENTS: PARTICIPATION AND BARRIERS IN CLIMATE CHANGE WORK

Abigail was one of the first participants I spoke to. When I asked her how long she had been doing environmental or climate change work, she recounted a professional history that saw several twists and turns. She went to New Orleans, Louisiana, to help with the extended recovery efforts a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina.[1] She intended to stay for two weeks on a January term trip from school, but instead stayed for over a year. She eventually left to participate in Green Corps, a training program for recent college graduates to learn how to run environmental campaigns. For a year, she worked all over the United States on clean energy campaigns. Her next position involved working to start a new project to diversify the coal economy in rural West Virginia through renewable energy. She then moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to work on stopping new coal plants from being built and began working with her current environmental organization. Abigail is an example of an interviewee who has been very active in a variety of roles in environmental and climate change work. At the same time, she saw numerous ways in which women's involvement in this work can be blocked. In her words:

> In terms of structures, decision-makers are still overwhelmingly male. For example, the public service commission is five white men over the age of fifty. . . . So, I think women are largely underrepresented in the power structure that we're trying to affect. That's probably, I imagine, also true in the utility industry. And then I think about the dynamics of the nonprofit sector in this country. . . . So, I see a lot of the work, like in the trenches, being done by women. Although [I] also recognize in the nonprofit sector, leadership often skews male.

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Abigail highlighted various structures that influence whether and how women are likely to be active in climate action. She also pointed to gendered patterns in the decision-making that influences climate change.

Abigail's work history fits in with the *women-as-agents discourse*. When using this discourse, participants spoke with pride about women's involvement in multiple facets of climate work.[2] They identified a range of specific roles and jobs, including women as consumers, laborers, wage earners, nonprofit workers, engineers, social scientists, climate change negotiators, farmers, conservation workers, teachers (of children, in their communities), and decision-makers, among others. They also identified women as potential agents in fields such as politics, engineering, and science—as space in traditionally male-dominated fields opens up for them. Women were frequently described as active participants in either environmental harm or action to protect the environment. The women-as-agents discourse also focuses on ways that women face obstacles to participation or feel sidelined or disregarded when engaging in climate change action. I highlight multiple storylines related to the idea of women being constrained, limited, or blocked, ranging from women's literal absence in some climate change spaces to women feeling that their contributions are undervalued. The discourse is consistent with calls to critically reflect on women as multifaceted environmental agents. It counters the portrayal of women as something that environmental change happens to and instead illustrates participation and action.

AGENCY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Academic fields such as international relations have historically tended to privilege states as agents within the international system (Ford 2003). Global environmental crises that do not respect state boundaries, including climate change, illustrate the necessity of thinking of agency well beyond states. Many scholars have pondered the concept of agency in international relations and environmental politics, considering questions such as which actors have agency (Ford 2003; Maclean 1999), what blocks agency (Brown and Westaway 2011), and how agents and structures interact (O'Neill, Balsiger, and VanDeveer 2004). One debate has centered on whether and how we should think of

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agency at the individual level. Some scholars express skepticism about or caution over focusing on individuals as agents to address environmental change (Kent 2009; Maniates 2001). Michael Maniates (2001, 33) famously warned against the "individualization of responsibility," arguing that "when responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society—to, in other words, 'think institutionally.'" He and others warn that focusing on individuals could result in the depoliticization of environmental issues.

Over time, however, global environmental politics scholarship has focused more on the individual and the "everyday" in environmental action. Scholars in this vein present an optimistic view of the transformational potential of individual action or at least a recognition of the everyday as a site of environmental politics (Eckersley 2020; O'Brien 2015). Karen O'Brien (2015, 1170), for instance, argues that "because of the scope and scale of transformations needed to reduce climate change risks and vulnerability, a more expansive view of political agency is required—a view that captures an individual's ability to contribute to transformations both by changing behavior and by influencing structures and systems." This view acknowledges individuals as political actors, but often fails to conceptualize them as gendered, raced, classed, and otherwise situated within sites of power (MacGregor 2021). According to Sherilyn MacGregor (2021, 48), "seen through a feminist lens, it appears odd that academics would choose to focus on everyday practices—especially those that are empirically most likely to be unpaid and feminized—without asking questions about who is performing them, under what conditions, and to what extent at their own choosing."

Feminist scholars across multiple disciplines have long centered the everyday in understanding gendered power relations within and across the structures that make up the international system (Di Chiro 2008; MacGregor 2017b). For instance, research has examined gendered environmental behavior such as green consumption as a site of agency in the environmental realm (Kennedy and Kmec 2018; Stolle and Micheletti 2005). This work acknowledges the empirical finding that women tend to outperform men in pro-environmental behavior (Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson 2004) but goes

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beyond this to call on scholars to take gender into account when we theorize and research environmental agency. Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti (2005, 45) argue that political consumerism, or "the buying or boycotting of products and services based on political or ethical values" is a form of civic engagement and political participation that is disproportionately undertaken by women and should receive greater attention in attempts to understand participation and social interaction.

This work is consistent with feminist scholarship that complicates the idea of "women's agency" more broadly. Feminist scholars who work on violence have demonstrated that women's agency is complex and often violates dominant assumptions about women's acceptable behavior. While gender norms in many societies paint women as peaceful or vulnerable, in reality, women willingly and often enthusiastically engage in political violence. Dominant ways of framing agency often ignore or mischaracterize these violent women (Åhäll 2012; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015).[3] Likewise, feminist environmental scholars show that although women's agency takes multiple forms in climate change action, essentialized portrayals of women and climate change that limit understanding of women's action as either virtuous or based on their victimhood persist (Arora-Jonsson 2011). Lena Partzsch (2017, 197) conceptualizes one form of agency as "power to" or the ability of individuals or separate groups to get things done.[4] Some of these choices are conscious efforts to mitigate or adapt to climate change, while others are choices that are freely made, but result in environmental harm. Agency in the realm of climate change, then, involves making choices and taking various actions that can either positively or negatively impact efforts to halt climate change.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CLIMATE CHANGE ADVOCACY

Media stories, government and other reports, and policymaker speeches frequently emphasize the importance of female participation and leadership in climate change and environmental work. For instance, in a series of public speeches in 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon repeatedly remarked that "the world's women are the key to sustainable development, peace and

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security." Additionally, articles with titles such as "46 Sustainability Leaders (Who Are Also Women)" (Townsend 2018), "8 Badass Environmentalists You Should Know" (Pierrat 2015), "The 20 Most Influential Women in Green" (Rogers 2010), and "4 Black Women Leaders on Climate, Justice, and the Green 'Promised Land'" (Calma and Rosa-Aquino 2019) highlight the contributions that women are making to environmental and climate change action. These examples illustrate that women's influential role in climate change is well-known and often celebrated. My interview participants were no less excited by the considerable presence of women in environmental activism and advocacy. A central storyline in the women-as-agents discourse is women-as-active-participants in environmental organizations and the environmental movement more broadly.

Large numbers of women are engaged in environmental action across the international community and have played this role for decades if not centuries in many countries. In the United States, for instance, where many of the interviewees live, women have advocated for environmental protection in large numbers since the turn of the twentieth century. They have been particularly active in advocating for environmental justice through the anti-toxics and anti-environmental racism movements since the 1970s (Bullard 2005; Seager 1996; Stover and Cable 2017). Given that many of the interview participants work for environmental nonprofit organizations, it is unsurprising that women's participation in climate change advocacy and nonprofit organizations came up a great deal in the course of our conversations. Interviewees often reflected on their personal experiences with environmental or climate change advocacy. Brittany, for one, works for a climate change organization in London that has a large number of women on its staff. She remarked that this is very encouraging for her as a female employee. In her words, "I think personally about my own realm, how it changed, but also about a bunch of climate bad assess that there are out there . . . loads of women working in that space. And I guess it's a lot more gender equal than a lot of other sectors." Likewise, Meg and Haley commented on the large number of women in their respective environmental organizations in the United States. Meg, who works in an environmental conservation organization, said she finds it easier to problem-solve in an environment that has

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gender balance. Haley, who works for a solar energy nonprofit, noticed a shift in the gender balance around her when she moved from working in the solar industry to working on solar advocacy, with women being more heavily represented on the advocacy side. When participants noted the abundance of women working on environmental issues, this was typically said with pride. They were proud to be in a field where women are particularly active.

While many interviewees highlighted women's overall involvement,[5] several also pointed out that there are gendered patterns with regard to where women are most active in climate advocacy. Haley specifically mentioned organizing, marketing, communication, and outreach as the areas in which women are present in large numbers in her organization and noted that they most frequently occupy middle-level positions. Alice, who works for a climate nonprofit in the UK, also noticed women in more middle- and lower-level positions. She said that her team is all female, but the management board is all male, as her organization has "become aware." Heather, a US academic, pointed out where women's voices seem to be the loudest:

> I'm just thinking of social activism and there are a lot more women's voices. . . . Not the big global stage where you have the Michael Manns and stuff, but, when I think about indigenous communities speaking out about climate change, women are visible in those communities. . . . There's so few women leaders internationally at every level, so yeah, it seems like if women are influencing . . . it's coming from sort of the bottom up.

Rebecca, a nonprofit worker in the UK, echoed several of these points, saying "my area has been very much in the communications and behavior change arena, and we do typically find more females work in that area than the other side of things which might be engineers or more technical stuff which does become more male dominated." In effect, then, women are often absent from those areas related to scientific expertise, as examined in chapter 5. Rebecca also reinforced the argument that women occupy lower- and middle-level positions more often than senior positions at many nonprofits. She went on to attribute some of this to some women getting burned out when working in that sector:

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> And something that I feel quite passionate about because I was one of them, I went into a charity very eager to please, very passionate about what I believed, and kind of loved what I did but was completely overworked and underpaid. Not that that would be any different whether I was a man or a woman, but I feel like that's quite a female trait maybe, . . . to not command some space in a "I deserve it" kind of way. . . . I was one of them and I feel like I see a lot of charities and a lot of organizations doing that to young people. I guess to men and women, but I see it more predominantly in women. They are eager to please, become completely overworked, they burn out and crash. Then they move on to a different sector or have a massive break and find their way back in.

Rebecca regarded people's excitement and eagerness as a good thing for getting people involved in environmental work, but also something that potentially contributes to some getting overworked and potentially even leaving the field. In her view, this often happens to young people, particularly young women.

Participants listed multiple reasons for their own decision to get involved in climate change or environmental advocacy. This was the case for those who worked in the nonprofit sector, as well as those who played a less formal advocacy role. Echoing Rebecca's statements above, most participants who work for nonprofits said that they wanted a job in which they "made a difference." Participants also often identified a long history of environmental awareness or activity that eventually led to them seeking a job in an environmental organization. Abigail, a US-based nonprofit worker, identified herself as an activist from the early age of eleven, when she started an environmental organization comprised of herself and her best friend called "Environment Crime Zappers." She explained that she "was already predisposed" to environmental action:

> I grew up thinking that every kid was plunked on the back of a bicycle and everyone had a compost pile in their backyard. And I grew up reading *Ranger Rick Magazine*, . . . [and] I attribute a lot of this whole orientation to the world as coming from that early exposure. . . . It turns out that my dad in his early twenties was out in New Mexico helping start the first solar association down there as an AmeriCorps volunteer. My mom was an educator; she worked in Head Start early on in her career. So, I think it's pretty deep in my family to have some kind of connection to people and the world around us.

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Other participants also noted their upbringing as a factor in their environmentalism. Shea dates her interest in environmental and climate change issues back to her time in college, when "a history professor mentioned the term 'environmental justice' to me and I thought that term was pretty cool." After looking it up, she "really got hooked to the notion of environmental justice and climate change policy." This led her becoming an environmental attorney and working for a consumer-focused clean energy organization in the United States. Shea was among several participants who identified school as the place that inspired their environmental interest. These women recounted classes they took, clubs they joined, or teachers they interacted with that fostered their environmental awareness. For some of these participants, this was the start of multiple years if not decades of environmental activism or advocacy.

Brooke, on the other hand, is an example of an academic who told me that she had recently "become an activist." She attended a city council meeting and spoke in favor of her city signing on to a national US mayor's letter on climate change. In explaining her idea of activism, she also mentioned her role spearheading a faculty climate statement at her university. Sarah is another US-based academic who recently played an activist role in her community. She spoke up at her daughter's school about how climate change was being portrayed there.[6] Her daughter's class was shown a pro-fracking and an anti-fracking movie, but in her view, the anti-fracking perspective was particularly weak. It bothered her that the students were receiving biased information, so she decided to take action by pushing back against what she saw as inaccurate climate information—backed up by her knowledge as a scientist.

The previous examples highlight the breadth of inspiration and action that participants identified as being associated with climate change agency. Overwhelmingly, participants argued that women's action and participation is necessary and essential for effectively addressing climate change. This necessity is born out of women's expertise and skills, but also because of the sheer fact that they are human beings who contribute to and are impacted by climate change. Participants said things like "They're half the population!" They also mentioned that women are more likely to have longer lifespans and that women outnumber men globally.[7] For these participants, women

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should be included and acknowledged in climate action simply by virtue of their presence and humanity.

Lyra, who works for a climate organization in Germany, noted that "if we want to tackle climate change and we do not really involve one half of the population, it's kind of a no-brainer that we really cannot achieve this paradigm shift towards a low-carbon society." She went on argue that society needed to include women in climate change projects not as simply a box to check or a grant requirement to meet, but because they have to be seen "as agents of change." Lyra was not alone in using this kind of phrase. Farhana thought back to her UK-based environmental organization's recent trip to Bangladesh when she repeatedly referred to women as "change agents," and "strong advocates within their communities." This perspective recognizes women's agency rather than viewing them as people *to bring in*. It identifies women's choices to get involved and sees them as already making important contributions to climate action.

When thinking about who takes action on climate change, participants mentioned women working at multiple levels—from women providing food for families, to women working in their communities, to women leading global climate negotiations. The scope and scale of action were huge. Participants recounted many specific examples of women in communities in the global South playing central roles in environmental management or development projects. For instance, Selma, who works for an environmental organization in the United Kingdom, recounted working with widows in Guatemala who made and sold weavings at festivals in California and used the proceeds to build water systems and latrines for their villages. In the course of a discussion about women's participation in climate change solutions, Lyra, who works in the nonprofit sector in Germany, recounted a story of a solar project in Latin America that failed to be sustainable until women were included in the project in greater numbers. Once women were trained to maintain the technology and took ownership of the project, it was more successful. She viewed this as an example of the necessity of including women in all facets of climate change work, while also noting that their potential was not fully harnessed in the process of designing climate projects or climate policies.

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At an individual level, participants mentioned both women who are known for their climate action and those who are not. As discussed in chapter 5, seven participants specifically identified Christiana Figueres as a woman whose climate change action is visible and essential. Participants also mentioned previous female heads of the US Environmental Protection Agency and of European Green Parties, as well as individuals such as Wangari Maathai and Mary Robinson as examples of women playing a prominent role at the state or international level. However, some were also quick to note that there are also women at the international level who do not advocate strongly for climate change. Mary, a British student and nonprofit worker used former British Prime Minister Theresa May as an example of this. "I think whilst it is important to have gender balance in decision making, unless the women and men that are making those decisions are doing it in a gender sensitive way, it won't necessarily change anything." Similarly, Allison, a US-based academic, argued that

> In politics, right, we're kinda depending on guys because that's what's out there. If more women would run, that would be awesome. But then again, I don't know that that's necessarily a guarantee that they'll do anything differently. I mean, you can look at Theresa May right now and Margaret Thatcher in the past.

Women, in short, are complex agents rather than simplistic "environmental protectors."

CONSUMPTION AS AGENCY

When thinking of women's agency regarding climate change, there is often a tendency to assign them benevolent roles. In media stories and policymakers' speeches, women are often depicted as environmental and climate change saviors (Arora-Jonsson 2009, 2011; Awumbila and Momsen 1995; MacGregor 2017a).[8] Depictions of women as "Gaia's warriors" or environmental givers of life proliferate in both the popular imagination and at one time among scholars, too (Sandilands 1999). For instance, early versions of ecofeminism used essentialist visions of women's closeness to nature to depict their central role in environmental protection as natural. After coming under

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significant critique from both within and outside of gender and environment scholarship, representations of women's place in environmental debates have become much more complex (MacGregor 2017b). At the same time, environmental protection still tends to be associated with femininity by many (Swim, Gillis, and Hamaty 2020).

One storyline from my interviews that counters or at least complicates this positive representation is that of women-as-consumers. Scholars have focused a great deal of attention on consumption and its role in environmental change (Dauvergne 2008, 2010; Princen 2002). While all living things consume resources in order to live, the effects of overconsumption or misconsumption are what concerns environmental advocates and academics. Thomas Princen (2002, 33) explains that *overconsumption* is "the level or quality of consumption that undermines a species' own life-support system and for which individuals and collectivities have choices in their consuming patterns," while *misconsumption* is the practice of individuals consuming in a way that undermines their well-being "even if there are no aggregate effects on the population or species." These specific forms of consumption have been the subject of both academic and policy debate. However, to date there has been little attention paid to connections between consumption and gender in fields such as global environmental politics, although work from multiple academic fields that finds that socially conditioned roles and responsibilities do influence consumption (Casey and Martens 2007; Ghodsee 2007; Johnsson-Latham 2006; True 2003).

The women-as-consumers storyline encompasses a depiction of women making decisions and taking actions that can result in environmental harm or good. Consumption was sometimes tied to gendered divisions of labor or norms in society. For a minority of participants, it was a source of women's empowerment, whereas for most it was indicative of the sometimes negative consequences of women's incorporation into larger economic and social structures. One common manifestation of the storyline involved noting women's specific role in making purchasing and other financial decisions for families or households. For instance, Haley, a nonprofit worker based in the United States, referred to women as the "chief financial decision-makers" of households. She went on to argue that this position would likely mean that

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women would be aware of the effects of climate change more immediately than would someone in a different position. Likewise, Alice, a UK-based nonprofit worker, mentioned women's tendency to be responsible for purchasing food for families and how this would cause them to notice an increase in food prices linked to climate change. For Haley and Alice, the gendered divisions of labor in the household result in women having advanced knowledge or experience of specific climate change impacts—namely those connected with food and other household goods.

Annica, a US-based academic, highlighted gendered purchasing patterns by arguing that women probably have a greater say in the purchase of appliances. "Definitely the ones that are located in the household. . . . So, I see a gender division in terms of purchasing decisions that influence household level purchases." For Annica, women's consumer decision-making extended to household items, but possibly not to other purchases in the same way—like buying a car. She clarified that she thinks men just tend to care more about what kind of car they drive.

> I'm really not interested in what car we drive. I'll drive whatever we have at home. I obviously, because I'm active in the area of climate change, I am more excited if we drive a hybrid than not, but whether that's one kind of hybrid or another kind of hybrid that really doesn't matter much to me. Whereas I see, not necessarily in my family but in other families, at least in the US and also in Europe, a car purchase is more important for a man in a household. So, it's not necessarily division of labor, it's what matters to people. What they're interested in.

Although Annica identified gendered patterns in consumption, she did not interrogate where they come from. In her view, her husband, along with other men, just care more about cars then she does. She doesn't identify similar levels of interest in the appliances that women tend to have a greater say over. Men's consumption is assigned to their interest, but the motivation for women's consumption in the household goes unassigned.

These references to their own role as consumers or how consumption plays out in their households were typical across the interviews. Nicola formally worked in the nonprofit sector for an environmental organization in the United States, but also mentioned actions she takes outside of work, including

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being involved in the fossil fuel divestment campaign at her alma mater and being "conscious of my own impact through my dietary choices and, sort of, consumption choices." Nicola noted that these choices about consumption are "very much part of my identity and thinking about the impact in the city that I live." Not only did she consider green consumption to be an important choice for her, but she saw it as part of her identity. Lily, a UK-based nonprofit worker, claimed that "I'm trying to make a difference and have lots of silly internal struggles in the supermarket. I'm going, 'Should I buy this pepper that's not wrapped in plastic or should I buy these three peppers that are wrapped in plastic but are much cheaper?'" Selma, a nonprofit worker in Germany, said that she doesn't always have time to find the greenest options since she is a busy, single mother.

> I'm thinking about women and consumption, in the Western world much more, and the difficulty that, for example, I would have. I'm a single mom, so I'm very aware of my consumption. Not 100 percent, but 50 percent aware of what I buy and should buy, and [what] the footprint would be. But at the same time, I cannot afford the time to run around and find the right place to consume better. So, I think in terms of mitigation, women with maybe more responsibilities in terms of raising families and maybe juggling work and family, etc., might . . . be polluting more and emitting more pollution. And I often struggle with how are we supposed to do it? You know, it's something else that we need to think about, something more that we need to do and juggle and how do we do it?

In each of these examples, interviewees reflected on how their individual consumption patterns fit within their larger efforts to address climate change. They were also frequently infused with a sense of guilt about consuming. Brooke, an environmental politics scholar in the United States, voiced this outright by saying that she feels like a hypocrite because she doesn't live a carbon-neutral life. Darcy, another US academic, touched on this emotional component of consumption and trying to be "green":

> I think [women have] certainly been socialized to have a more caregiving role, I suppose, and maybe to think more about their roles as those who cook, and those who shop, and going to the grocery store, and recycling, and being environmentally friendly, and all that kind of stuff I think falls to women in the

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> domestic sphere more than men. And so, it makes sense maybe that they would be confronted in a more day-to-day level with those kinds of ethical decisions. And so, I guess if they're the ones going to the store and purchasing the products more so, or the ones who would have be sorting the recycling from the garbage or whatever, on the day-to-day experiential level I think it makes sense that women would be more attuned to our environmental crisis.

Darcy's comments specifically highlighted the influence of the socially constructed "domestic sphere" in women's relationship to consumption and their feelings about the process, rather than any natural inclination to shop and cook. At the same time, these comments, along with the women-as-consumers storyline in general, depict a middle-class perception of consumption within capitalist economic structures. In this perception, women have the means and choice to make decisions about their consumption.

Allison, an environmental politics scholar in the United States, expressed frustration with the gendered nature of expectations about who in society are consumers. She referenced the "feminization of the shopaholic" and the "stereotype that women are the ones who are always buying more and more stuff." The association of women with shopping has long historical roots (Styles and Vickery 2007; Vickery 2006). Allison argued that these are likely not accurate pictures of consumption, and there is some academic evidence substantiating her point. A 2013 study of consumption patterns in the United States by Brenda Segal and Jeffrey Podoshen finds that men outscored women in both materialism and conspicuous consumption, while women were more likely to engage in impulse buying (Segal and Podoshen 2013). Their findings suggest that a simplistic picture of the shopaholic woman is inaccurate and fails to take into account men's significant levels of consumption. These findings are supported by other academic work that identifies a complex relationship between gender and consumption—not one in which women are the consumers and men are not, but rather one in which all consumption choices are influenced by multiple factors (Costa Pinto et al. 2014). In fact, consumption is a part of larger social and economic structures that we all live within. How and what we consume are deeply connected to where we live (and the economic structures there), how much money we have, and norms around things like "the good life" (Dauvergne 2005, 2010). Gender is also part of this story, as are a lot of

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other factors. Depicting women as somehow more predisposed to shopping than men is not only inaccurate, but also diminishes the agency of women by framing their consumption as more natural than men's.

When consumption is discussed in environmental debates, it frequently has a negative connotation. In the context of my interviews, there was often an implicit assumption that consumption is bad or part of the problem of climate change. One exception to this pattern came from a US-based nonprofit worker named Gwen, who considered consumption to be a force for change, since "women have a lot of buying power." Gwen was one of only a few participants who used a consumption-as-empowering storyline. She argued, "I think that women have a role to play, you know, on policy, but they also have a role to play on changing their own circumstances; buy an electric vehicle, putting solar panels on their roof." She gave the example of a California-based solar company that markets explicitly to women as evidence that their consumption can be a force for change. She commented that "we're calling them the Mary Kay of solar panels," referencing the US-based cosmetics company that also advocates the vision of empowered women buying and selling for their own futures. While both companies have their critics, the example of a women-focused solar company fits in with an optimistic image of green consumption. Notions of green consumption, sustainable consumption, or ethical consumption encourage individuals to use goods and services in ways that enhance current quality of life while not jeopardizing the needs of future generations (Barr, Gilg, and Shaw 2011; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Lewis and Potter 2011). Some versions of sustainable consumption are relatively status quo oriented while others see consumption as "a site of new forms of political engagement, ethical consideration and aesthetic representation" (Soper 2009, 92–93). These various forms of sustainable consumption arose out of debates about the role of capitalism in environmental change and offer illustrations of the complex relationship between agency and structure in the realm of consumption. While it is true that some individual consumers can choose to buy electric vehicles or put solar panels on their roofs, many cannot due to cost or availability. Additionally, consumers have little to no say in where solar or electric vehicle companies source or dispose of their materials (Dauvergne 2008). In the

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area of consumption, humans more often have the appearance of agency more than the actuality. That being said, concepts such as "political consumerism" recognize a specific form of agency that often intersects with gendered divisions of labor in households or gendered norms about consumption (MacGregor 2021; Stolle and Micheletti 2005).

WOMEN'S ABSENCE FROM CLIMATE WORK

The women-as-agents discourse features storylines that highlight women's presence and activities, but also instances where women are restricted, blocked, or absent. What does it mean to refer to women as absent from climate change spaces? It surely does not mean that women do not exist in communities that experience climate change. Rather, in the women-as-absent storyline, women are underrepresented in circles of power. This includes being excluded from debates about how climate change is conceptualized and from left out of the decisions that influence mitigation and adaptation policy.[9] Interviewees commented on women lacking "a seat at the table" or not having "their voices heard" in various spaces related to climate change, including industries that emit greenhouse gases, clean energy startups, science (or STEM fields in general), corporations, environmental organizations, policymaking groups, and conferences and negotiations. Eva, for example, mentioned these patterns when reflecting on her work for an environmental nonprofit in Germany. In her words:

> The energy world and the, especially the policy, legal world in Germany is a little bit more conservative and is mostly dominated by senior, I would say, white men. This is an issue that all my colleagues also run into, like wow this was a great conference but unfortunately, there were no female speakers, or I was the only female participant. That's unfortunately a recurring theme.

Like Eva, Talia also works in the nonprofit sector in Germany and highlighted how underrepresentation in climate events is gendered and raced. She remarked on the participation of white men at the Conference of the Parties (COP) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and specifically referred to women's perspectives as "missing"

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from these meetings. This idea of visibility and acknowledgement was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Some interviewees observed that women and other historically marginalized communities are most frequently left out of highly visible climate change work. This is one instance where some participants included an intersectional lens in their responses. They referred to gender imbalance but specifically noted that white men were the ones who tend to dominate.

Interviewees identified women in the global South as well as indigenous women as two categories who are much more likely to be excluded or underrepresented in high-profile climate work or environmental decision-making. To these, Lyra, who works for an environmental nonprofit in Germany, also added the lack of representation of "vulnerable groups in climate change processes and decision-making." Selma also works in the nonprofit sector in Germany and drew on environmental work she had done in various countries to make a similar point.

> I think it also has to do with the power of decision because in many countries, the power of decision-making is taken away from women, or at least they can't express it in public. A lot of decisions are made that are counterintuitive for women or are against what they would have done. And so, there's a situation where, in my experience, the woman sees what is going on around her. And I'm thinking a lot about East Africa and drought, and Niger, and also the villages in Guatemala, I worked a lot with widows there. They know exactly what is going on and what is needed. And it's very difficult to get it going because they're not on the circuits. They're not included in where the money is, where the discussions are, where the decisions are made.

Carin, an academic in the UK, likewise drew on her fieldwork to discuss the phenomenon of women's representation on governing councils in India. She noted a rule stating that women must make up a certain percentage of the village council. Yet they never actually attend the meetings as their participation is symbolic. Hildi, who works for a nonprofit in the UK, cited her academic fieldwork in Gambia to reflect on women's absence in decision-making:

> So, I basically do feel like women are underrepresented in the actual decision-making . . . in Gambia also, this particular village or town, it's kind of divided

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> into four traditional areas within the community and each of those, the oldest man in each of those will automatically sit on the local counsel. So, it's not that women are not able to access governance, but there's already a type of stepping-stone just based on your gender—you've been disqualified.

Hildi situated this example in a larger discussion of gendered patterns of access to and participation in decision-making circles.

Like Hildi, Carin, and other interviewees, identified a number of reasons for women's exclusion, most of which relate to the continuity of existing power dynamics in the international system. Participants depicted women as having less power, fewer resources, lower status in society, fewer rights, less respect, and lower literacy rates (in the global South). Interviewees argued that women have less advantageous employment (that is, they have part-time, lower paid, lower status jobs), tend to be lower income/poorer, and have historically been encouraged to take a back seat to men's success. They also pointed out existing power dynamics in climate change spaces to explain women's exclusion as white men still dominate. Participants used various phrases to refer to those who dominate conversations around climate such as "men in suits," "good old boys clubs," and "silverbacks." Haley and Sharon both mentioned "good old boys clubs" when talking about who they interact with in their work for a clean energy organization in the southern United States. In this region, the phrase refers to men in power who reward their friends and maintain the status quo, along with their own position in it. In these instances, interviewees were talking about the power structure in the utilities sector and state legislatures. Heather, who works in the United States, also pointed out the dominance in climate change meetings of "silverbacks," a term that may come from her background in biology and conservation. She recounted a meeting she had just attended that "really was old white guys in these panels":

> And I realize—wow, these guys aren't even thinking about, like, it's not even on their radar to consider women's voices. What they're doing, in part . . . it's a way of, sort of, elevating their status by surrounding themselves with [other] white men in these panels. Because they're like, "These are what I think of as, really heavy hitters and so if I'm on a panel with these guys then, I too am a heavy hitter." They don't think of women as being legitimate and powerful voices. So,

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> it would lower their status. I don't think they're doing this consciously at all, but subconsciously I really believe they think it would lower their status if they included women on these panels. Because then it would be women's work and it would not be as high status, or, or hardcore, and it's just infuriating.

Whether it is silverbacks or good old boys, multiple participants highlighted not only what the existing power structure looks like, but also how it is maintained by excluding those who are not currently in the dominant group. Their reflections also indicated the difficulty faced by those who seek to change those structures or alter the path forward. The good old boys club is only a club so long as membership remains exclusive. The silverbacks remain the heavy hitters as long as other members of the group do not rise to their level. Interviewees noted that these dynamics work because women's contributions as well as those from other historically oppressed groups tend to be underestimated or undervalued.

WOMEN AS UNDERVALUED

There are many ways that women's climate change work is undervalued or underestimated. Participants mentioned instances when they or women they knew were not taken seriously or were perceived as less competent than their male peers. They felt that women are often invisible, overlooked, or ignored. This manifests in being treated differently by colleagues, being denied credit for ideas, or being unable to get the same coverage as men even when they are present in science and politics. These obstacles to women's effective or valued participation appear through a women-as-undervalued storyline. Examples of this storyline have already appeared in chapter 5 where interviewees noted instances when their expertise was challenged. Within the women-as-agents discourse, the women-as-undervalued storyline situates challenges to expertise within larger patterns of women feeling that their contributions to climate work are not seen as equivalent to others.

In particular, some women noted that they have been perceived differently from their male, often older, peers. Mary reflected on her experience at the UK Environment Agency by saying, "I quite often found that the communities reacted differently to me as a woman than they did to my male colleagues,

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in that the farmers don't like being told by the Environment Agency what to do, and particularly if it's a man. But if it was me, they were kind of like 'I don't know what I think.'" Participants attributed these kinds of experiences to their young age, their gender, or both. In these cases, they felt that their expertise and sometimes their position were being called into question. Haley, who works in the United States, felt that some people with whom she interacts in the energy sector fail to take her as seriously as they should. "As a woman . . . especially being a younger woman, I think . . . It's seen kind of like this pet project. Or it's like, 'oh well, that's the thing that she's focused on.' You know, 'that's cute.'" Haley's use of the term "cute" indicates feeling belittled or underestimated in gendered ways. In this passage, feminine things are considered to be cute, including her environmental advocacy.

Because of these associations, some interviewees noted that women feel pressure to change feminine characteristics to become (more) visible in climate change spaces. For example, Brittany argued that this was true in the context of her work for an environmental nonprofit in the UK and also in her interactions with family members. Her father encouraged her to change her debate style in order to be more effective.

> I've learned to not be so passionate, which I think is a bad thing, but also been told not to shout . . . told not to be loud. And had to learn those skills of calming down and to take the emotion away. And there's a pressure to do that to be listened [to] and taken seriously. Which is difficult because it is such an emotional thing to talk about.

In her view, she needed to avoid being seen as emotional in order to be taken seriously in her climate change work. However, she also claims that this is not necessarily a good thing because climate change is an emotional issue. Nevertheless, she has altered her debate style because of her belief that she will not be listened to if she displays passion or emotion.

This example illustrates how gender norms shape assumptions about appropriate behavior from an early age. For many of us, families are a powerful source of information about gender norms. Some participants mentioned censoring or otherwise limiting conversations about their jobs with family members because they either had negative reactions to what they do in the past or were afraid of getting those reactions. Brittany mentioned that her

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family tended to see her environmental work "as wishy washy and fluffy, and looking after the animals and caring for the environment. Not that it's coming from a place of sound economic sense, or business sense." Likewise, Eva noted that she has family members who view her environmental work in Germany as "kind of like a silly, activist sort of thing to do. It feels like it makes it easier also for them to not necessarily take it very seriously." Brittany and Eva's experiences with family members echo those of Haley in the energy sector mentioned above. They all recounted instances in which they felt that they were not taken seriously. This is likely tied to the feminization of environmentalism—where expressing environmentally friendly attitudes or performing "green" tasks is associated with femininity (Brough et al. 2016; Swim, Gillis, and Hamaty 2020). Many jobs associated with femininity or that are dominated by women tend to be underpaid and less valued than the ones dominated by men. Since environmental action or behavior is often associated with femininity or women's tasks, choosing this as a career can be met with ridicule or at least dismissiveness.

Some interviewees also referred to instances in which women who participated in climate change work or environmental governance were assumed to have lower status or else seen only as tokens or "motivational speakers" rather than as full participants. Haley said she was often referred to as a secretary or assistant in her communications and marketing positions in the solar industry. In her view, people assumed she held a lower-status position due to the fact that she was young and female. Selma specifically discussed women of color and their representation in climate change spaces. She recounted feeling as though people invite women of color to speak merely in order to meet a diversity goal rather than valuing her perspective:

> I think we are still seen as, you know, as cute. And maybe I'm being a bit too critical, but from a feeling, this is definitely something I have felt. And obviously I worked a lot in Africa and also the Vietnamese culture is also very, very patriarchal. We definitely have a lot of prejudice against us, straight away. And they say it, I mean, it's not even hidden. It's like that.

For Selma, patriarchy shapes people's assumptions about the significance of women's work in climate change action. Talia, a nonprofit worker from Germany, reinforced this idea of women of color being used as props or

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tokens. She argued that women from the global South might be brought into climate change conferences or negotiations as "motivational speakers," but not really valued in the same was as other actors. Instead, they are there to make everyone feel good or progressive. In these instances, participants felt that although women are present, their inclusion was symbolic rather than based on recognition of their expertise.

Working in climate change, like many other issue areas, involves a large number of meetings and conferences. Some interviewees wanted to talk about gendered patterns they notice or experience in these settings and why this might influence how people think about or address climate change. For some participants, these discussions also seemed to be a way of expressing some frustrations or venting about various issues that had been bothering them. Several of them recounted specific stories of women being undermined or belittled at professional events. Kimberly, a nonprofit worker in Germany, gave an account of women being interrupted and talked over at a meeting she recently attended. Both Sharon and Jessie, nonprofit workers in the United States, mentioned the same incident that took place at a board meeting of a large utilities company they had attended for their respective organizations. At the meeting, one of the two female board members pushed to adopt gender-neutral names (i.e., being called "chairperson" rather than "chairman"), and the male board members "treated it like it was kind of cute." Sharon said she went from being encouraged that someone was trying to get people to think critically to being disappointed that it was received so poorly by the people in positions of power.

The way professional business is conducted has long been established in most fields related to climate change. While the format of meetings, the timing of events, and the professional norms concerning who is present have the appearance of neutrality, in reality, however, they influence whether and how one participates, as well as assumptions about who is successful or effective in these spaces. For instance, if an institution has a history of using gendered titles such as "chairman," it reinforces assumptions about who is most likely to be in positions of power. It is noteworthy that two interviewees working for two different organizations both discussed the same event. Each saw it as an example of a woman's attempt to address these gendered patterns

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of access and position of not being taken seriously by others in the room. Similarly, if an organization holds a large number of events in the evenings and on weekends, many parents may be unable to attend if they do not have accessible childcare. Moreover, if the expectation of an organization is that you will prioritize work at the expense of other things in your life, those who have other commitments will be at a disadvantage. Paige, a nonprofit worker in the UK, reflected on how being a parent would make the kind of climate change work she does difficult:

> Climate change is such an issue of passion and a lot of people who are in it, it is the only thing they care about. . . . And I think that's impossible for people who have multiple things going on in their lives. . . . I do see it all the time in other women who go on maternity, and then have kids, and the dynamic is just totally different. And they inevitably end up in the operational roles because they just can't keep abreast of the strategy, and the policy, and the politics. . . . It's something I've discussed with friends a lot, like, how on earth would you do this with kids?

This passage highlights links between the women-as-caregivers and women-as-agents discourses. The often-intense demands of climate work coupled with the unequal care burden that many women face can result in a barrier to their participation. This sheds light on the fact that climate work cannot be understood without reflecting on how it is situated in larger social, economic, and political structures.

WOMEN'S EXCLUSION FROM LARGER STRUCTURES

Many scholars warn against conceptualizations of agency that fail to recognize how it is embedded in existing structures of power. They argue that agency is "what becomes socially established in any particular historical period as the natural limits of social reality and thence of social practice" (Maclean 1999, 33). Lucy Ford (2003, 124) claims that "any conceptualization of resistance and emancipatory forms of counter-hegemonic agency require [*sic*] a recognition of global hegemony and the dominant agency already inscribed with it." Scholars must understand how power flows through existing structures before we can chart alternative paths through them. A theme

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that came up repeatedly across the interviews was that women face challenges to participation in climate change activities and that these challenges are rooted in economic systems, political systems, cultural assumptions about "the good life," and other fundamental aspects of daily existence. Thinking about women's agency and obstacles to that agency necessitates reflecting on how gender and other factors reinforce ideas about who should be present in climate change spaces. One of the most important themes to emerge from the interviews is the notion that while there are multiple communities that are deeply committed to addressing climate change, some major features of those communities limit the extent to which this is currently being done in inclusive ways. For instance, women still tend to be underrepresented within the scientific community. Likewise, the activist or nonprofit sphere has a gendered, raced, and classed legacy of mainstream environmentalism (Carter 2018; Curnow and Helferty 2018; Toomey 2018). While there have been important shifts in the academic and nonprofit realms, we must not ignore this history. Simply put, it will be impossible to fully break out of existing patterns of action if we do not identify where problems lie.

Women in Industry and Tech

Numerous interviewees reflected on women's exclusion from the economic decisions that helped usher in the current climate change predicament, including decisions about resource extraction and consumption in the fossil fuel industry. In some instances, this involved drawing a link back to the Industrial Revolution, which profoundly redefined humanity's relationship with the natural world (as discussed in chapter 3). The key figures that are associated with these changes are men, and they are the ones who shaped the revolution's outcome. In the words of Elane, a nonprofit worker in the United States, "I think traditionally . . . women have not been at the table to acquire fossil-fuels, they have not been part of the rampant expansion, they have not been a part of the means by which large-scale electric generation has, in the developed world, come to pass." This is not to suggest that all interviewees think that women's leadership or increased presence would have resulted in a different outcome. As mentioned previously, several participants expressed skepticism that women would have necessarily made different decisions.[10] What they did agree on was that women were simply not the ones making those decisions.

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At the same time, interviewees noted that women are also underrepresented in sectors that are supposed to lead the revolution away from fossil fuels, including the "clean energy" sector along with other technological areas. Their responses focused on both the gender imbalances within these fields as well as the dominant perceptions of human-environment connections that accompany these fields. As Ivy, a Canadian academic, observed,

> The sort of dominant discourse of climate change solutions tends to be, in my opinion, quite technocratic. You know, like let's build higher bridges, let's, in agriculture, develop all these new drought resistant seeds and then patent them and protect them . . . and make them very profitable as well. And so, I think that in many ways if we look at the institutions, like in agriculture for example, the large corporations that are putting out these very technocratic solutions to climate extremes, those institutions are very much still male-dominated organizations.

This "technocratic approach," which sees climate change as a problem to be fixed by human ingenuity and intervention, is also deeply connected to a business-as-usual mindset, both literally and figuratively. It fits with capitalist economic models. It also typically absolves people of the need for large-scale behavioral change. Kristy works for an environmental nonprofit in the United States and reflected on the gender imbalance in fields associated with these technological approaches to climate change:

> When it comes to clean energy technologies, it tends to be a very engineering-dominated field, so one could argue that maybe on the mitigation side there are more men technically working on that. It's well known that women are underrepresented in the sciences . . . engineering, math, physics—it's more men. So, to the extent that the solutions on the mitigation side would be coming out of those fields, then yes, I guess one could argue that it's probably more men. And particularly, men in developed countries. Which means they're probably predominantly white men.

Kristy was not alone in specifically mentioning clean energy as an area that is lauded for its great potential in addressing climate change while also significantly lacking diversity. According to Hildi, a nonprofit worker in the UK, "The majority of people I know who work in energy cooperatives are men. And the majority of people who benefit from large renewable energy schemes in

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the manufacturing industries—such as the big offshore wind manufacturing site that is being constructed in Northern England—are men." Likewise, Shea and Sharon noted a similar gender imbalance through their work with clean energy organizations in the United States. According to Shea, "When we look at clean energy enterprises and clean energy sector in general, it's predominantly white men. There's a significant lack of representation [of others]." In Sharon's words,

> Even with the renewable energy industry too, it's men. Underlying it all is the fact that men are most of the executives in any of the big companies that are doing anything revolutionary. I'll see more women in conservation jobs or clean up.

When it comes to climate engineering technologies, there is a vibrant literature on their politics, ethics, and environmental consequences (Biermann and Möller 2019; Jinnah 2018; Jinnah and Nicholson 2019). Some of the most controversial include strategies such as capturing carbon and storing it in the oceans or underground and albedo modification (i.e., intentionally increasing the amount of sunlight that is reflected back to space in order to reduce the amount absorbed by the earth). While these tactics have long been a subject of discussion within scientific circles, they have increasingly moved into more mainstream international climate change debate, as evidenced by their appearance in documents like the Paris Agreement and IPCC reports (Jinnah 2018). What does this increased visibility mean for perspectives on climate expertise? As noted above, some interviewees argued that when people think of solutions to climate change, many bring up technological that which are male dominated. Allison, a US-based academic, said: "I would like solutions to be non-gendered, but for instance, with the predominance in men in STEM fields, it is likely that solutions in terms of technology are going to be mostly created by men. Just because of the predominance of men in those fields." Kit, an academic based in the UK, went further to suggest that not only are more men involved in these fields, but also the emerging technologies are actually designed for them:

> I mean one of the big critiques about energy efficiency and it talks about "resource men" and how these, sort of, smart-energy technologies are, sort of, designed with this ideal "smart man," "resource man" envisaged. Somebody

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> who is very technically minded, rational, makes decisions based on economic savings. Not based on the woman who says that I'm not going to put my washing on in the middle of the night because it's going to be creased by the time I come to it in the morning.

Kit argued that women are not wrong when they prioritize something other than economic savings, but they might be seen that way. This reinforces the idea of women being underestimated because standards of evaluation privilege traits typically associated with masculinity.

A few participants noted that in their experience, women often prioritize different aspects of or approaches to climate change than their male counterparts. Deb, an academic working in the UK, said that she saw women as focusing more on "the human elements of security rather than seeing the solution in technological or mitigation through flood gates, barriers, innovation through engineering." She also mentioned that women might tend to be more proactive than reactive. This was echoed by Darcy, a US-based academic, who referred to "technocratic or traditionally male dominated scientific approaches, versus more women-centered . . . approaches that would focus on . . . personal interactions or on-the-ground interventions." Likewise, Janice brought up how these gendered dynamics tend to play out in her own US-based environmental organization and the work it does coming up with solutions to climate change:

> I'm fascinated by the ways in which men and women react to the complexity of addressing climate change and we see this all the time in our office, and these are generalizations, but the men tend to be wanting more technical approaches and to be technocratic about it. . . . Whereas a lot of the times the women will, they want to know that there are solutions, but that they also really want to know how people are going to be impacted and how they're feeling about it.

She also went on to say that in her experience, it is often men who express strong faith in both the effectiveness and salience of technical approaches.

> We will be in meetings where you will hear the women in the organization specifically say we need to appeal to the heart. We need to appeal to a shared sense of humanity. We need to appeal to a sense of community, we need to get mothers involved, they care, you know, about the future of their children. Which

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> is not to say that fathers don't, but women will talk more perhaps in that way. So, and then on the male side they'll say, you know, the fossil fuel companies are just going to crush us like bugs if we go all touchy feely on everybody. And what we really need to do is prove the promise of the clean energy economy. And here are all these economic studies that demonstrate that the clean energy economy is inevitable, and we're in a clean energy revolution. And here's all this data and all these statistics that tell us that were well on the path. And we just need to use information and facts and figures.

By contrast, Nora, who works in the nonprofit sector in the UK, argued that both men and women are "sucked into techno fix approaches" to climate change. These kinds of paths are attractive to many because they offer the promise of addressing climate change without the need for significant behavioral change. Feminist scholarship has outlined multiple ways that geoengineering intersects with gender, including the demographics of those pushing the method, the overall discourse of control involved in geoengineering, the design of the particular technologies, and the populations who will benefit most from geoengineering (Buck, Gammon, and Preston 2014).

Annise, another US-based nonprofit worker, wondered why more men in positions of power do not try to benefit from the transition away from fossil fuels.

> A lot of times I'm just thinking at home like, "Alright white men, just get on the renewable resources, you know, like, there's going to be a lot of money in those things. Just get off oil. Get off all of your dirty fossil fuels and make a bunch of money in the next, you know, exploit the next industry, whatever. But move on."

Assuming that it will be white men who will be in a position to take advantage of the next revolution in industry, Annise added that their motivations could actually be useful. "I think we need some greed and some power hunger [to], kind of, generate the industry we need that will create a cleaner economy and environment." In this view, a goal of immediate sustainability is prioritized over long-term shifts in the structures that contribute to climate change. This trade-off was mentioned by multiple participants working in the environmental nonprofit sector.

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Women in Environmental Organizations

In the aftermath of the "Environmental Revolution" discussed in chapter 3, environmental organizations with global reach were the ones most successful in attracting funding and cultivating strong networks. A good deal of this depended on board members being part of established power systems that could amplify their position (Ignatow 2005). Thus, professional environmental organizations came to resemble other male-dominated professional entities as they grew more formalized with paid positions and formal bureaucracies (Stover and Cable 2017). Historically, women have been both absent from leadership roles and underrepresented among support professionals (i.e., lawyers, scientists, and the like) in most environmental organizations. At the same time, women have comprised a large percentage of their members (Seager 1996; Taylor 2016).

While participants acknowledged the widespread participation of women in environmental and climate change organizations in general, they also noted a lack of women in top positions. Swati, who works for an environmental nonprofit in the United States, wondered how the predominance of older white men in well-funded organizations "impact[s] the analysis of the issue, and the solutions that are presented, and leadership on the issue" of climate change. Those in leadership positions may not see environmental issues the same way as communities with a different set of experiences.

Some interviewees also described events such as conferences or industry presentations where they still saw a large number of "men in suits." This picture was often held up as the contrast to the women-dominated or at least gender-balanced organizations they worked for. These "men in suits" (sometimes "fancy men in suits," sometimes "white men in suits") were discernable at solar industry conferences, environmental advocacy awards events, UN panels, and even photoshoots. Paige, a co-director of a climate change organization in the UK, recounted that during a campaign her team delivered with another, well-known global environmental organization, she was she was "basically shoved out of photos." The male director of the big environmental organization told her that "the thing is, photographers they want photos of men in suits." In her view, this is an outdated picture of environmental action. She asserted that "we have seen plenty of photos of men in suits standing in front of things." However, the fact that the male director held on to the assumption

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that men in suits best represent environmentalism likely speaks to larger societal expectations about the face of "professional" environmentalism.

While some might expect environmental nonprofits to be progressive on matters of gender due to the large presence of women within them, many participants argued that this is not the case. According to Janice, who works for a climate change organization in the United States:

> So, all of the big gender sexism challenges that we have in society . . . exist for sure in the climate space. Without a doubt. And I, so I was at Yale in the seventies, which Yale was just changing from being all male to being co-ed, and the journalism space was also extremely sexist. And the high-tech space which I was in for seven years was also extremely sexist. So, I wouldn't say that the climate space is any more or less sexist and gender biased, but it's the same old shit.

In her view, climate change organizations exhibit some of the same gender dynamics at play in other areas she has worked in. Patriarchy remains an ever-present obstacle to truly equal participation at present despite the large presence of women in climate change or environmental organizations. For her part, while Swati believed that the composition of organizations is definitely changing to become more diverse, she thought that "it's changing a lot slower than most people would like." She explained that her environmental organization currently is and historically has been led by white men. About a year prior, they decided to engage outside consultants for a diversity assessment of the organization because they understood that they "needed to be much more reflective of the community" they are serving. There was also reflection on how broad movements can facilitate change. In her words, "if you looked at our staff and board it's not reflective of that at all, but then also, looking internally at our culture too, that, you know, we still act in very much in a white male heterosexual kind of dominate frame, so how do we make ourselves be more inclusive in different ways?" She noted that the diversity assessment made members of the organization confront uncomfortable trends in how they interacted with each other. They collectively reflected on issues such as how the organization engages with the community, but also more specific interactions like who cleans the office kitchen and brings in the birthday cards for colleagues.

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This speaks to a trend of women and men performing different tasks in environmental organizations. In Sharon's words,

> Every nonprofit is going to have communications, development, organizing . . . and then you will get people coming into the technical analysis fields. For the most part the data analysis people are men. The technical conversations you find yourself in [are typically majority men].

She argued that most of the "feminine" tasks of an organization (i.e., communications, education, outreach) tend to be performed by women. This is the case for her US-based clean energy organization and many others she is familiar with. Similarly, Aubrey, who works for a climate change organization in Germany, indicated that women's presence tends to be seen more in areas such as climate change education rather than lobbying or tasks directly related to climate science. She mentioned one of her friends in the lobbying industry feels the pressure to "prove herself" in this profession:

> I know that she faces a lot of issues of . . . you know, when she walks into the room, having first to make lots of very good scientific statements before people will accept what she's saying because she's a young woman. . . . She really feels this barrier of, you know, being a woman. Having to, kind of, prove herself first before people trust what she's saying. Whereas she doesn't feel that some of her maybe older male colleagues have to fight that barrier.

In addition to highlighting the "barrier" of being a woman, these observations are consistent with the women-as-undervalued storyline.

A few participants also pointed out how the large presence of women in environmental advocacy intersects with other issues of diversity and inclusion. Heather, a US academic, pointed out that women tend to be found more at lower levels than at the top. She argued that there is likely more space for women's voices, including indigenous women, to be heard at lower levels because of existing power dynamics. June, who works at a US environmental organization, observed that achieving gender balance will get an organization only so far if it truly has goals of inclusion and transformation:

> I feel like also in the environmental movement we've been talking a lot about how we've been so historically white, but and often we don't really talk about the

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> fact that, we don't address gender that often because, especially in our organization, we are led by all women, and our two presidents, our CEO, one of our board chairs, they're all women, and our staff is like 70 percent women. So, it's not something that we talk about a lot. But . . . even though we are led by women, there is still this patriarchal and hierarchal nature of our organization that I think is probably reflected in a lot of environmental nonprofits that are currently being led by women but have historically been set up by men.

June argued that for organizations to embrace collaborative processes and avoid exclusionary top-down decision-making, they need to think about the composition of their staff as well as how the organization is structured and interacts with the community. In the same vein, Annise commented that "we can't just win as a bunch of predominantly white middle-class, middle- to upper-class outdoorsy people." She reflected on the need for environmental organizations such as hers to build diverse coalitions with people working toward similar goals. Feminist scholars have illustrated that it is not only the composition of institutions that is important for equitable outcomes; rather, the process of decision-making and the behavior of actors also matter a great deal (Magnusdottir and Kronsell 2015).

Though interviewees found it encouraging that women make up such a large percentage of the environmental movement, they also voiced frustration that they are still underrepresented in "masculine" areas of organizations and in top positions. Those areas seen as "masculine" often overlap with the STEM fields discussed in chapter 5, including those involving technical and data analysis. Participants also acknowledged that white men dominate the leadership of most major, wide-reaching organizations. They largely failed to mention the many gender and climate change organizations or networks that have been active for years in multiple climate spaces, including GenderCC, WEDO, and many other national and global environment and gender organizations.[11] Their reflections about the environmental movement focused mostly on their own organizations in the case of nonprofit workers or well-known organizations in the case of those outside this sphere.

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN-AS-AGENTS DISCOURSE

This discussion of environmental organizations illustrates one of the major features of climate change within the women-as-agents discourse—climate change is a space of work. This work involves politics, industry, tech, nonprofits, and more and requires navigating existing norms and power structures. Climate change is also impacted by human actions such as consumption or organizing—sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. It also forces people to consider the future. Will our society transition to clean energy? A green economy? Transformational perspectives and norms on human-nature connections? Climate change forces us to consider a future where the status quo is impossible, but we disagree on what or how much change is possible.

Where are the women in the women-as-agents discourse? Interviewees saw women participating in climate work or action at multiple levels. They were in environmental organizations, at city council meetings, and in classrooms. These women are consumers and climate bad asses, motivational speakers and leaders in the environmental movement. The women-as-agents discourse, like the women-as-knowledgeable discourse explored in the previous chapter, pushes back against pervasive depictions of women as passive victims of climate change. It highlights choices women make to get involved in environmental and climate change action, as well as choices women make that might contribute to environmental change. Participants reflected on their own agency, as well as that of women in general. In the case of their own agency, they outlined specific actions they take and the reasons behind them. They explained their passion for getting involved as well as the toll that the work can take. In particular they often identified women's strong presence in environmental work as a source of pride and inspiration. In general, there was a greater tendency to note women's agency in tasks associated with advocacy or adaptation rather than mitigation.

The discourse also features a great deal of reflection about where women are absent. Participants pointed to the underrepresentation or absence of women from STEM fields and the fossil fuel industry, as well as clean energy companies, and politics. They also noted their tendency to be missing from top positions in environmental organizations. They identified some barriers to agency, including the composition of the worlds of activism and the

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academy. In order to think of women as agents, it is essential to reflect on what keeps people from being agents or else in some way negatively influences their agency.

Participants offered multifaceted portrayals of women's agency. They reflected on collective action that women participate in as well as their everyday activities. Reflecting on agency and "everyday activities" reminds us that people make choices that shape environmentalism, but that these choices are simultaneously shaped by various forms of power in the international system. According to Sherilyn MacGregor (2021, 56), a great deal can be learned from approaches that regard "everyday life not as a euphemism for 'what ordinary people do,' but as a site of 'production, reproduction, exploitation and domination.'" Interviewees acknowledged that thinking of women as agents means identifying instances of powerful climate action and also times when women's choices contribute to the current environmental predicament. Participants' use of the women-as-consumers storyline illustrates this complexity. They used the storyline to reflect on their own consumption patterns, assess gendered patterns of household labor, and critique essentializing assumptions about women's overconsumption. At the same time, participants who used this storyline overwhelmingly associated women with household consumption, including green consumption. They are not alone in this association as companies themselves tend to target women with eco-friendly products and marketing (Hunt 2020). Assuming or encouraging women's green consumption can have multiple implications for society, including adding to women's already unequal domestic responsibilities, as well as potentially encouraging men to view environmentally friendly behavior as feminine. Some existing research identifies an implicit cognitive association between the concepts of greenness and femininity. The work finds that the association can affect social judgments and self-perceptions and lead men to be less willing to engage in green tasks linked to women's work (Brough et al. 2016; Swim, Gillis, and Hamaty 2020).

Whether consumption should be understood at an individual level is another issue. While the notion of individual agency, or "power to," captures the imagination,[12] individual efforts at sustainable consumption are unlikely to be sufficient to effectively tackle climate change (DeSombre 2018). They

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are also cost-prohibitive for many people and can result in classed perceptions of who is environmentally virtuous and who is not (Scerri and Magee 2012). Participants who used the women-as-consumers storyline overwhelming described middle-class women like themselves without reflecting on consumption as embedded in other systems of power, including class or race.

The majority of participants who brought up consumption saw it as just one aspect of climate change. Lily's comment about "silly internal struggles in the supermarket" indicates that she doesn't regard sustainable consumption as the final solution or the most important aspect of her climate change work. Likewise, Selma's remarks about consumption framed her individual challenge in larger structures. She wondered how she, as a working, single mother, is supposed to make the greenest choices with limited time. This is an instance when the women-as-agents discourse and women-as-consumers storyline make a useful contribution to thinking through climate change action—by conceptualizing women's agency as located in larger economic, political, and social structures—but more reflection is needed about this embeddedness.

Numerous participants who highlighted women's place in domestic consumption specifically linked this role to the women-as-caregivers discourse outlined in chapter 4. They discussed women's responsibilities caring for families and households as a reason why they tend to have a larger say in purchases of food, appliances, and the like. In one participant's view, "Women are the ones who are playing that role of being the caretaker for the family." The idea of "playing a role" indicates that there are other possibilities, but this is what society expects of them—this is their position as the script of gender norms has been written. None of the participants used the feminized "shopaholic" trope that one participant found so frustrating, but instead tended to point out why they personally consume the way they do, or why women's consumption might lead to greater awareness of climate change impacts or even opportunities for greener consumption. Environmental scholars and activists have loudly called for reductions or changes to consumption but fail to adequately interrogate the gendered aspects of why people consume the ways we do (Detraz 2017b; MacGregor 2021). The women-as-consumers storyline features reflections on how consumption is

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tied to dominant images of both masculinity and femininity. In this way, participants voiced a facet of consumption debates that scholars in fields such as global environmental politics have been slow to address.

That being said, there tended to be a good deal of homogenizing about "women" across the women-as-agents discourse. The sites of agency as well as patterns of restriction that participants identified often followed dominant portrayals of women's environmental action. Seema Arora-Jonsson (2011) describes this as the assumption of women's virtuousness in the global North, contrasted with women's vulnerability in the global South. The assumption is that white, northern women are "more sensitive to risk, more prepared for behavioural change and more likely to support drastic policies and measures on climate change" (Arora-Jonsson 2011, 746). In her view, these kinds of assumptions are reinforced by reports on gendered differences in ecological footprints that have been cited extensively by those working on climate change and gender (Johnsson-Latham 2006). It is essential that women's agency is recognized and supported in order for climate change efforts to be both effective and equitable. At the same time, it is important to unpack discussions of women's agency to understand how they might unintentionally reinforce the very structures that have made women's participation in multiple facets of climate change work difficult. For scholars such as Arora-Jonsson, painting women as either virtuous environmental saviors or hapless environmental victims can have its own set of negative implications. These tropes can, and are, deployed with little interrogation about power distribution across existing social, political, and economic structures. Women become a category of people "to bring in" either because of their virtuousness or victimhood. This "bringing in" potentially avoids asking questions of why women's participation in various areas of environmental protection has been lacking in the first place, including questions of how and why their agency has been limited. This is in no way to suggest that women's inclusion should be shunned or limited, but rather to ensure that this inclusion allows for their full selves to be present and not the imagined saviors or victims that may be expected of them.

Additionally, how do assumptions about women's agency and action influence the tasks they end up performing? Does assuming that women care

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more for families and communities mean that they will continue to play a larger role at that level? Is women's participation in a local environmental organization somehow more natural than their involvement in international climate change negotiations? Some participants touched on these ideas in our conversations. Brenda, a nonprofit worker in the United States, mentioned that women are "supposed to be, kind of, doing the good work." Women are expected to be active and be caretakers, while men are presumed to be the breadwinners. These gendered stereotypes impact who feels the emotional weight of environmental protection along with how some environmental work is compensated. A few participants noted that there might be more women active in environmental work, particularly at lower and middle levels, because it is poorly paid and undervalued. This is connected to the notion that "doing the good work" is its own reward, or that fair compensation is more important for men since society expects them to be providers. If that is the case, using essentializing frames to discuss women's climate change actions reinforces these assumptions. Even if participants overwhelmingly indicated that they get emotional satisfaction or other nonmonetary rewards from their climate change work, it is still problematic if the work is undervalued—either economically or in status, something that frequently occurs with women's labor across the globe (Benería 1995, 2003; Coffey et al. 2020; Elias and Roberts 2016; Waylen 1997). When the women-as-absent or women-as-undervalued storylines were used, it was often in reference to social norms. Women were not formally blocked from taking part in activism or scholarly endeavors. Rather, participants felt that they or women like them were overlooked. There is great deal of scholarly evidence that women's contributions to environmental action are frequently misunderstood or marginalized (Kennedy and Kmec 2018). This is particularly the case as women's household or community tasks are depicted as small-scale and less important than some other climate work (Whetung 2019). Additionally, simplistic assumptions that women might be particularly well-suited to environmental tasks because of an essentialized vision of their "naturalness" persist (Gonda 2017).

Large numbers of women play significant roles in everyday activities and collective action related to climate change. A large contingent of youth

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climate activists has young women leading the charge (Eve 2020). The most visible of these in the global media has been Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. In August 2018, she started a school strike for the climate outside the Swedish Parliament building. That movement has spread to cities around the world and inspired school strikes by children in numerous countries along with the large-scale global climate strikes in the fall of 2019. Thunberg took her message of climate action to numerous seats of political and economic power—including the United Nations, the European Parliament, the World Economic Forum, and governments in multiple capital cities. She was named *TIME* magazine's Person of the Year for 2019 and has been the subject of an outpouring of news stories, including being pictured in *TIME* with the headline "Next Generation Leaders." Although Thunberg has received the lion's share of attention, she is just one among a number of youth climate activists in public eye. In fact, there are multiple young women of color leading the US youth climate movement, including Jamie Margolin, Nadia Nazar, and Madelaine Tew, founders and executive directors of the Zero Hour movement, and Isra Hirsi, executive director of the US Climate Strike (Burton 2019). It is essential to avoid limiting these and all other women's agency with relatively narrow frames of the kinds of roles that they might be particularly well-suited to play. Reflecting on women as agents requires assessing where and how women have made important contributions to climate action along with the consequences and challenges to this action.

Women's climate action is sometimes met with distain and derision, especially when their message challenges the status quo. There have been numerous commentaries detailing the intense and charged language used to attack female climate figures (Gelin 2019; Moore 2019; Raney and Gregory 2019), including Thunberg, Canada's former minister of environment and climate change Catherine McKenna, and US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. This trend is consistent with academic work that points to substantially significant linkages between climate denial and gender norms (Anshelm and Hultman 2014; Jylhä et al. 2016; Krange, Kaltenborn, and Hultman 2019). For example, research on climate skepticism in Sweden by Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman (2014, 85) notes that the phenomenon "can be understood as being intertwined with a masculinity of

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industrial modernity that is on decline." In their view, climate sceptics adopt this position in part because it saves "an industrial society of which they were a part by defending its values against ecomodern hegemony." Rejecting climate change and belittling climate activists, especially young female activists, serves as a coping mechanism in a period of transition when many members of privileged communities feel that their privilege is eroding. The increased awareness of Earth's climate reality means the actual and potential shake-up of power structures, which could mean that some who have benefited the most from current social, economic, and political structures will lose this privileged position. This might help explain why multiple public figures in the global North have made sexist and ableist comments about a teenage climate activist such as Thunberg (Gelin 2019; Moore 2019). She may be seen as representing a future in which young girls are not blocked from participation by their gender, age, or social position.

The women-as-agents discourse highlights the positives of recognizing and expanding women's environmental action, but it also necessitates acknowledging the negatives that sometimes accompany this participation. The previous chapter mentioned that some climate scientists have experienced gendered or sexualized harassment when their research gets picked up by mainstream media or climate skeptic outlets (Johnson et al. 2018; Ogburn 2014; Waldman and Heikkinen 2018). Likewise, women who act as "environmental defenders" have been subjected to threats of violence, threats against their families, and murder (Glazebrook and Opoku 2018). While environmental activists have historically been at risk of being criminalized or experiencing violence or human rights abuses (Global Witness 2019), these risks take on a particular cast for women as they are often specifically gendered. Dalena Tran and colleagues (2020, 1190) explain that "women activists are often delegitimized based on their gender. Trying to enter public, political spaces for debate turns them into targets for multiple forms of violence. Murder is the most visible of these in environmental conflicts, but all threats to women defenders are difficult to document owing to intersecting marginalities and stakeholder interest in covering up abuses, as well as the fact that literature on violence in environmental conflicts does not separate data by gender." This means that thinking through women's agency must

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necessarily entail reflecting on not only obstacles to their participation, but the consequences they may face for this action.

Who are the women most frequently included in the women-as-agents discourse? Participants disproportionately focused on women in the global North. Participants mentioned women from the global South as agents, but they often saw them as resource users. They did not talk much about women from the global South buying cars or attending protests. Women from the global South were mentioned as advocates for climate change action, but typically these were indigenous women, not employees of professional environmental organizations.[13] Likewise, the categories of marginalization discussed in chapter 3 (i.e., race, age, disability, class, and place) did not feature heavily in reflections on agency even when interviewees described environmental action in the global North. The exception to this is in reflections on the overrepresentation of white men within existing power structures.

That, in turn, led to observations about women's absence from or undervaluation in multiple forms of climate change action. These storylines call attention to marginalization mainly in professional spaces. It highlights that simple calls to "bring in more women" might ignore the significant number of women who already exist in climate change work or result in bringing more white women into climate spaces while doing nothing to address racial or other imbalances. For instance, we might ask why it is that Thunberg, a white Swedish activist, has garnered so much more global attention than youth activists of color. The fact that Thunberg has risen to such prominence makes her an unfortunate target of scorn and derision, but it also raises questions about why the global media has tended to pay more attention to white activism and disregard movements led by people of color. It is essential to listen to those activists and academics who have explored why environmentalism in the global North tends to be very white (Carter 2018; Curnow and Helferty 2018).[14] Suzanne Dhaliwal (2015), the co-founder of the UK Tar Sands Network, argues that "if you were to trust what you see in the UK media you would think that climate change is a white issue that speaks to and is populated by one demographic alone." This speaks to the portrayal of global issues such as climate change, but it also relates to the composition of mainstream environmental organizations. A 2014 study that examined

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diversity within US environmentally focused organizations found that after close to five decades of diversity goals, gains in representation were uneven (Taylor 2014).[15] The greatest gains were made in the area of gender, but white women far outnumber women of color in these organizations. There is a significant lag in achieving racial and ethnic diversity overall in these spaces, as the percentage of people of color on the boards or general staff of environmental organizations was less than 16 percent, and less than 12 percent of the leadership positions. Additionally, the members and volunteers of environmental organizations are predominantly white. Furthermore, a study of over 2,000 environmental nonprofit organizations in the United States found that the percentage of nonwhite staff and board members remains low, while fewer organizations are now voluntarily reporting their diversity statistics. The study also found that men make up less than half of the staff of the organizations but occupy 62 percent of board positions (Taylor 2018).

This finding is in line with the fact that interviewees' professional environmental organizations largely tended to have a history of white men in positions of power. While this trend was shifting, the overrepresentation of white voices was still raised as a problematic element of climate work. The same structures that have resulted in gendered patterns of participation and representation in climate action are also raced and classed. Thus, while women tend to have fewer seats at the leadership table than men, white women are still more likely to occupy those seats than women of color. The whiteness of the environmental movement, along with whiteness in science, came up multiple times across the interviews. Participants commented that it is largely white people in positions to tell us what the world is and how it should look in the future.[16] Reflecting on women as agents affords us the opportunity to assess where and how women have made important contributions to climate action along with the consequences and challenges to this action.

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Women and Climate Change

Examining Discourses from the Global North

By: Nicole Detraz

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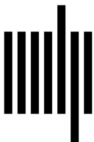

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