

Gender and Climate Justice

by Lori Lee Oates and Sritama Chatterjee

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There can be no climate justice without gender justice.

Hanna Soldal, COP 28 Press Statement

The global-level threat that is climate change is now impossible to ignore. The Oxford English Dictionary (2025) defines climate change as "an alteration in the regional or global climate; esp. the change in global climate patterns increasingly apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards, and linked largely with increased emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases caused by human activity." *The 2024 State of the Climate Report* maintains that "we are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. This is a global emergency beyond any doubt. Much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperiled" (Ripple et al. 2024).

For some years now it has also become increasingly clear that the impacts of the climate crisis are not shared equally. Women and marginalized populations are disproportionately experiencing the worst impacts of climate change. This is exacerbated by the fact that in many regions of the world, women and girls bear most of the responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel (United Nations 2022). In 2022, *Al Jazeera* reported that households in Bangladesh that are headed by women allocate up to 30 percent of their income to protect themselves from climate change. The same article also discusses a study from the International Institute for Environment and Development which found that this figure was double the average of 15 percent, largely because women have lower incomes (*Al Jazeera* 2022). According to the Government of Canada's own climate plan, Canada is heating at twice the global average—three times as fast in Canada's North. Furthermore, Indigenous and Northern women are much more likely to be impacted by climate change (Native Women's Association of Canada 2025; Environment and Climate Change Canada 2022).

One of the important books reviewed in this special issue of *Atlantis, The End of This World* (2023), addresses the need for Indigenous sovereignty if the contemporary world is ever to achieve true climate justice. The book effectively makes the case that ending settler colonial capitalism is necessary for a just transition away from fossil fuels. Indigenous poets such as Jacinta Kerketta and Indigenous book publishing agencies such as Adivaani, based in India, are breaking new ground in environmental pedagogy. In a country that is disproportionately impacted by climate change, environmental pedagogy is, in and of itself an act of rebellion.

This special issue builds on decades of work by ecofeminists who have long paralleled oppression of nature with the oppression of women. This great body of work has included such scholars as Rachel Carson, Vandana Shiva, and Wangari Maathai. Today, the links between masculinity and planetary destruction are ever more obvious as the climate emergency picks up speed. The simultaneous challenges of the expanding far right and climate change are, in part, rooted in a patriarchal desire to continue the white male supremacy that was foundational to the colonial project. Wheatherill (2024, 673) has effectively argued that “much of the reason for the lack of action on climate change is because vulnerability is discursively constructed as a racialized and feminized characteristic.... It is the feminized, racialized Other who is vulnerable, not the masculine, rational white male subject.” The masculine interests that control our global commerce and governance seem to prefer that the planet remain under threat, rather than admitting that everyone is at risk, including the white men who control many institutions. Similarly, Daggett (2018) has made the case that there are links between climate denialism, racism, and misogyny. Developing the concept of “petro-masculinity,” she considers how oil, gas, and coal are intertwined with masculine identity:

Fossil fuels matter to new authoritarian movements in the West because of profits and consumer lifestyles, but also because privileged subjectivities are oil-soaked and coal-dusted. It is no coincidence that white, conservative American men—regardless of class—appear to be among the most vociferous climate deniers, as well as leading fossil fuel proponents in the West (27).

Political scientist Michael L. Ross gained a great deal of academic attention in 2008 when he argued that the lack of progress in gender equality in the Middle East was caused by oil, not Islam. Ross noted that fewer women worked outside the home and held positions in government in the petro-states he had studied. Ross attributed this to labour patterns which made it less likely that women would join the non-agricultural workforce in oil-producing jurisdictions. He followed this research with *The Oil Curse* (2012) in which he further explained the concept of “petroleum patriarchy.” Ross’s views were challenged by Pippa Norris in *Politics and Gender* (2009) on the basis that there are petroleum-patriarchy outliers such as Canada and Norway. However, scholars such as R.W. Connell (2020) increasingly argue that we must look more closely at context to truly understand how hegemonic masculinity manifests within specific jurisdictions and situations. This argument was brought home in the Canadian petro-province of Alberta in 2020 when a cartoon surfaced of then-teen climate activist Greta Thunberg being sexually assaulted. The design was printed on a sticker with an oil company logo and quickly went round the world in global media. While the oil sands may be often associated with petroleum patriarchy, Canada is generally seen as a global leader in gender equality. However, much more work remains to be done on petroleum patriarchy, including in oil states that are not ordinarily associated with gender inequality.

Situating racial and colonialist logics of reproduction is crucial for our conversation on climate justice and gender today. While discourses of over-population are anchored in eco-fascist movements that aim at controlling black and brown bodies, as well as trans bodies, globally, the work of gender studies and environmental humanities scholars now is to critique the eugenics and whiteness that permeates the over-population discourses. In 2019, scientists across the planet collaborated on an editorial in the journal *Bioscience* to warn of the “climate emergency” (Ripple et al. 2020). The authors clearly prescribed the policy directions needed to avoid the worst outcomes of global warming. Their most important recommendation for women and girls was that they should have access to education and family planning to curb population growth. Ironically, as the United States, a major global superpower, experiences more climate disasters, it has also shifted away from reproductive freedom. Donald Trump’s simultaneous plans to “drill baby drill” and impose a national abortion ban suggest that climate deniers were never seriously interested in curbing populations as a climate solution.

There is a growing body of scholarship on global south and black feminist conceptions of reproductive justice. It includes scholars such as Jennifer C. Nash, Asha Nadkarni, and Sara Matthiesen who have investigated both the historical and cultural contexts in which eugenic and overpopulation discourses have thrived, disproportionately impacting black and brown women, and trans people of color. In the words of Margaret Atwood, author of the fictional story *The Handmaid's Tale*, “Who controls the women and babies has long been a keystone of every repressive regime on the planet” (Atwood 1985, 2). The same privileged nations that create most of the emissions per capita frequently point to the higher populations of India and China as the problem. To these climate denialists, North Americans have a right to drive cars, fly frequently, and own yachts, while families in India and China do not deserve coal-powered electricity (Oates 2021). As reported by Oxfam (2023): “In 2019, the super-rich 1% were responsible for 16% of global carbon emissions, which is the same as the emissions of the poorest 66% of humanity (5 billion people)” (viii). We also recognize the work of Farhana Sultana who discusses “the unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality,” which argues for the need to address ongoing colonial violence that continues to be part of global governance, policy making, and research.

The articles, interviews, and book reviews in this special issue of *Atlantis* reveal what climate change can tell us about both the feminine and the masculine in the contemporary world. What these pieces have in common is a focus on what a *just* transition, rather than merely green transition, must look like. The authors included here ask us to look beyond ongoing corporatist solutions that are an extension of the colonial project. This scholarship also goes well beyond the usual Western media analysis of climate change to consider the need for decolonization.

Olstead and Burnett consider the “land ontology” of the Mi’kmaq First Nation. While acknowledging their role as settler scholars, they consider how “the coloniality of gender” (Lugones 2010, 742) underpins violence against the land. They effectively make the case that the normalization of violence against Indigenous women can help us understand the practices that underpin the destruction of earth.

An article from Hurlbert, Kairy, and Datta argues for “a shift away from top-down approaches to more participatory, community-led solutions.” They argue for adopting the practice of listening to and collecting women’s stories as a feminist decolonial methodology. The article makes two key contributions to envisioning global climate justice: (1) participatory methods are crucial to climate justice work in the academy and; (2) while the marine ecologies and vulnerability to sea-level rise are at the heart of dominant environmental scholarship on Bangladesh, it is crucial to center narratives on different kinds of water bodies.

MacDonald explores how feminist-queer environmental pedagogies, in different classroom spaces, could be a form of resistance. The article argues that reflections on the politics of place through personal histories can be a queer-feminist invitation to think about histories of land, labour, Indigenous dispossession, and gender dynamics. Furthermore, the author argues that a classroom that centers creative-writing practices and personal experiences can radically interrupt the corporate university.

As co-editors we were especially pleased that we were able to interview Camilia Dewan, author of *Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development & Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh* (2021). She effectively makes the case that we need to reconsider the concept of vulnerability in relation to the women of Bangladesh, who often have strong kinship with family members and extended families on which they depended. These contributions are then rounded out with book reviews of *The Intersectional Environmentalist*, *The End of this World*, and *Queer Ecofeminism*.

On a more personal note, we as co-editors, would like to thank all the contributors and reviewers for exposing these important issues of gender and climate justice. It is our desire that this work can help to take us, as scholars and activists, a few steps closer to developing climate solutions that are anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal. We hope we have helped to demonstrate that these issues are at the very heart of the ongoing destruction of the Earth. We also want to take a moment to acknowledge our positionalities while editing this issue. Sritama is an international graduate student of colour and based in Pittsburgh while completing her PhD. This is also the ancestral lands of the Osage people. The special issue was largely completed at a time when the Trump government was com

ing down hard on immigrants of colour with ICE raids. Lori Lee, as a white settler, respectfully acknowledges that she works on a campus that is situated on the traditional territories of Indigenous groups, including the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit.

Onwards to achieving a just climate future.

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