

## COMMENTARY

# Critical climate justice

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## Abstract

Climate change has had unequal and uneven burdens across places whereby the planetary crisis involves a common but differentiated responsibility. The injustices of intensifying climate breakdown have laid bare the fault lines of suffering across sites and scales. A climate justice framework helps us to think about and address these inequities. Climate justice fundamentally is about paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways. Critical climate justice as a praxis of solidarity and collective action benefits from greater engagement with intersectional and international feminist scholarship. Incorporating insights from feminist climate justice bolsters solidarity praxis while enriching and reframing dominant climate change discussions for more impactful and accountable action.

## KEYWORDS

climate justice, feminism, praxis, solidarity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report has raised alarm bells globally (IPCC, 2021). While IPCC assessments over several decades have warned how rapidly climate change has been occurring and the increasing need to halt rising global temperatures, action has been tragically slow. Given how relatively quickly institutions, states, and citizens across the globe responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that drastic and rapid response to climate change is possible. While climate breakdown has been acutely experienced across several regions and communities for quite some time, a delayed but welcome global-level public consciousness to climate change has awoken as climate-related disasters have become more profound. While mainstream debates around climate change have historically been scientific and technical, and climate action has been mired in delays as well as climate denialism (Lamb et al., 2020), greater attention is increasingly given in public discourse to climate justice. Climate justice helps to reframe mainstream debates to usher in critical attention to social impacts, outcomes, and justice concerns.

In general terms, climate justice scholarship demonstrates how climate change is a moral and justice issue, not just a science, techno-managerial, or finance issue (Gardiner, 2011; Shue, 2014). In other words, climate justice fundamentally is about paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways. The goals are to reduce marginalization, exploitation, and oppression, and enhance equity and justice. Applying a climate justice approach is an intentional process that involves carefully analyzing who is excluded or marginalized by climate change processes as well as any adaptation or mitigation

interventions pursued. A climate justice approach focuses on who benefits, who loses out, in what ways, where, and why. It is an explanatory tool that helps better explain the relationships at different scales that co-create and maintain injustices.

Climate change has had unequal and uneven burdens across places whereby the planetary crisis involves a common but differentiated responsibility. This sentiment was captured in the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It is well documented how communities that have contributed the least to climate change are the ones who are most unduly burdened and harmed by it over decades and even centuries (Davis & Todd, 2017; Pettit, 2004; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Historical and geographical differences are highlighted and brought to the forefront in discussing climate justice. Colonialism, capitalism, and globalization are imbricated in the production of uneven climate injustices, and critiques of these interlocking systems are increasingly included in climate justice scholarship. In what follows, I posit that critical climate justice is a praxis of solidarity and collective action that benefits from greater engagement with feminist scholarship. Attention to and engagement with intersectional and transnational feminist insights helps critically advance more nuanced and responsive understandings of climate justice. It can help reframe debates away from reductionist solutions to more accountable assessments and action.

## 2 | CRITICAL CLIMATE JUSTICE PRAXIS

To have justice, it becomes imperative first to identify injustices that exist and then address underlying causes. Climate justice is in many ways inherently about praxis. Praxis means theoretically informed practice with reflection, one where there are continual feedbacks and integrations. Philosopher Paulo Freire described praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). In broad terms, critical climate justice praxis demands systemic changes to address structural inequities and destabilize power systems that produce various climate injustices (Foran, 2016; Mehta et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2015). Equity considerations emphasise actions that reduce and remove harms, making the underlying commitment of climate justice to political action and solidarity. Critical climate justice underscores issues of differential exposure, vulnerability, and risk. Accountability and obligations, as well as ethics and human rights, are integral to climate justice. This also involves re-evaluation of global political economic systems that produce and reinforce socio-spatial injustices. The goal is to not further burden impacted communities with further harms, loss, and damages. A critical climate justice perspective investigates how and why different groups of people face inequities in different ways from climate change, integrating insights from a range of academic theories (such as feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, post-colonial, decolonial scholarship), as well as insights from activist movements for climate justice, in order to foster praxis of solidarity and collective action.

Indeed, climate justice is not only an academic body of interdisciplinary scholarship but involves social justice and environmental movements. Activist movements and non-governmental organizations pushed for the climate justice debates in the 2002 COP (Conference of Parties meetings of nation-states on climate change). Thus, climate justice has always involved grassroots initiatives and activist alliances resulting in collaborations across place-based mobilizations. Climate justice has become a galvanizing force among social movements, indigenous movements, and youth movements. While some variation exists in the considerations and praxis of climate justice, the overarching commonality of understanding and mobilization focuses on equity and fairness in climate governance and redressing climate-related harms. Critical climate justice praxis encourages academic theorizations that are empirically derived and contextually appropriate (Foran, 2016). It is continuous unlearning to relearn, and collaborate, re-evaluate, and redress various interlocking oppressions.

Climate justice approaches seek to expose the root causes of climate change to address and dismantle these systemic issues and structures in different ways. These include dismantling fossil fuel dependency, defetishization of endless capitalist growth on a finite planet, challenging non-participatory democracy, resisting extractive exploitation of natural resources, confronting racial capitalism and Indigenous erasure, among other things (Davis et al., 2019; Moore & Patel, 2017; Sultana, 2021b). Attention is brought to fairness in framing climate change and to variegated socio-ecological connections (Jafry et al., 2018; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Meaningful climate justice addresses complex issues across space, place, and scale. Spatial (i.e., across communities and countries) and temporal (historical and intergenerational) considerations in terms of vulnerabilities, losses, and damages have increasingly become apparent (Forsyth, 2014; Robinson & Shine, 2018). Understanding and accounting for differentiated vulnerabilities and precarities are central. Consideration is brought to the role of power, power structures, and social disparities, and how these are embedded within multi-scalar issues such as broader political economy, development, and globalization.

Climate injustices are historically and spatially produced. These have disproportionately burdened racialised post-colonial communities and countries of the global South (Agarwal & Narain, 2019; Gonzalez, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2020), as well as minoritized communities in the global North (Brand & Bullard, 2009; Pellow, 2016). Disaster frequencies and impacts have increased in large parts of the global South over several decades – such as hurricanes/cyclones, floods, sea-level rise, heatwaves, wildfires, air quality, and land erosion – but these are also now frequently impacting greater areas of the global North as climate breakdown ramps up globally. The numbers of deaths, losses, displacements, and recovery costs have only compounded across frontline communities. Climate apartheid draws attention to the socio-spatial disparities of climate change, often correlating with colonial and racial injustices across places (Bond, 2016; Tuana, 2019). Some scholars have argued that wealthier countries owe post-colonial countries a climate debt due to historical and contemporary unequal ecological exchange and the colonization of the atmosphere by colonial and imperial states (Hickel, 2020; Malm & Warlenius, 2019; Roberts & Parks, 2009). Climate change has been a form of slow violence to racialised and impoverished communities across the global South (Nixon, 2013). Racial capitalism and colonialism, along with contemporary neoliberal globalisation, compound climate injustices (Gonzalez, 2021; Verges, 2017). Past injustices make people more disproportionately vulnerable to climate impacts, which exacerbates impoverishment and vulnerabilities. The lived experiences of climate injustices demonstrate the differential marginalisations occurring among and within communities. Therefore, scalar and contextual climate justice has become essential to assess and address. However, the normative aspect of climate justice has made international negotiations difficult, along with the global North not taking sufficient responsibility for historical and contemporary global emissions and enacting accountability (Chu & Michael, 2019; Holland, 2017; Klinsky et al., 2017; Okereke & Coventry, 2016).

Given existing challenges at international levels, scaled-up solidarity praxis and collective activism for critical climate justice is essential. Engaging with local communities is central, with the explicit understanding that romancing the local is counterproductive and can obscure contextual intersectional oppressions. Considering intersectional gender, race, class, and Indigenous aspects of climate justice can help ensure interventions are equitable and contextually appropriate (Sultana, 2021a; Whyte, 2020). Such concerns need to be worked through carefully and conscientiously, and this is where feminist insights are particularly prescient.

### 3 | FEMINISM FOR ADVANCING CRITICAL CLIMATE JUSTICE

Feminist scholars have long demonstrated how climate justice will not be as effective or equitable without feminist perspectives and insights, since these integrate various feminist strands of scholarship as well as anti-racist, anti-colonial, and decolonial scholarship to advance justice-oriented praxis and futures. Feminist insights often inform critical climate justice scholarship without necessarily carrying a feminist label. This is because critical feminist analyses help to reveal oft-overlooked or buried concerns, exposing interconnected inequities and harms. Indeed, it was at the 2007 COP where “No climate justice without gender justice” was a rallying cry from feminist climate activists and social movements. Women have been at the forefront of climate justice movements (Terry, 2009). They have raised awareness of the importance of paying attention to the differential gendered burdens and harms worldwide (Agostino & Lizarde, 2012; Cochrane, 2014). Increased intersectional gendered marginalisation, inequality, and vulnerability results from climate change (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014; MacGregor, 2010; Osborne, 2015; Sultana, 2014). However, feminist analysis of climate justice is more than that. Feminism critiques capitalist patriarchy (Acha, 2019). Structural inequalities and power relations of capitalist patriarchy occur across household, community, state, and international levels, whereby scalar analysis incorporating feminist insights reveal barriers and opportunities that can exist in configuring climate justice pathways.

Feminist scholars examine the iterative and multiple knock-on effects of socio-ecological changes to gender relations in any given context (Sultana, 2021a). Vulnerable communities are not homogenous; instead, they are gendered intersectionally (by class, race, Indigeneity, migrant status, etc.). Such analyses necessitate investigating and addressing the contextual axes of oppression and differentiations. Feminist climate justice scholarship engages with intersectionality to demonstrate how patriarchy compounds socio-ecological crisis. It avoids essentializing women or men into binary categories but looks at specificities of interlocking systems of oppression and exploitation. By offering a more complex view of gender, the varied risks, responsibilities, and rights can be accounted for. Such analyses and praxis continue feminist traditions of inquiry into inequities and injustices that promote critical reflexivity in engagement and analyses, which are vital for actualizing critical climate justice.

Integrating feminist insights into critical climate justice also promotes inclusive planning and action beyond techno-managerialist climate solutions. It can strengthen women’s strategic activism, advocacy, capacity building, and resource

and network access (Dankelman & Naidu, 2020). It also documents women's lived experiences and elevates differing voices (Godden et al., 2020), as well as how international political economy of development can derail gender justice in climate action (Fresnillo Sallan, 2020). Spatial intersectionality across the global North and South, and scalar intersections of race and Indigeneity, are essential aspects of feminist climate justice. Moving away from victim narratives or fetishising resilience narratives to co-constructions and partnerships are necessary (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Thus, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist praxis advances more complex understandings of climate injustices and consequent abilities of people to cope, adapt, and renew. Promoting care and commoning instead of endless growth, and attention to feminist ethics of care and solidarity for structural inequities exacerbated by climate change, have been advocated for (di Chiro, 2019; Clement et al., 2019). Scholars have also called for abolitionist climate justice (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021) that attempts to reframe climate harms to include broader institutional and infrastructural harms, environmental racism, and lived traumas.

#### 4 | MOVING FORWARD

Incorporating insights from feminist climate justice to bolster solidarity praxis enriches and reframes ongoing climate change discussions in multiple ways. Reframing includes reformulations of institutional arrangements to foster solidarities across differences and redistribution of power. While discussions ensue on divestment and systemic dismantling of fossil fuel capitalism, attention is also needed on reparations and reciprocity. Universalistic logics are confronted to underscore differential harms and vulnerabilities. An underlying theme in all this is the importance of solidarity praxis; that is, critical climate justice can only be achieved through working with others in collectives, both local and international. Accountability and feedback loops, and collaboration and co-learning, facilitate transitions away from current structures that historically produced and contemporaneously reproduces climate injustices. Such perspectives offer the possibility of transformations to occur, instead of seeking redress solely from within systems that are undergirded by patriarchy, racial capitalism, colonialism, extractivism, and exploitation (Sultana, 2021b). The colloquial saying “the chickens have come home to roost” tragically points to the rising climate anxieties among elites in the global North, yet this is also an opportunity and a need to cultivate solidarity alliances and collective action with historically marginalised communities whose grievances and losses were ignored and denied for a long time. Such alliances can support more equitable justice.

Reframing with attention to intersectional feminist insights is also central to moving forward at other scales and sectors. For instance, climate finance or aid from advanced industrialized countries to historically exploited and impoverished post-colonial countries should not be considered charity or philanthropy, but rather as accountability and responsibility (Perry, 2020). Climate reparations are the acceptance of this responsibility of historical and contemporary harms and injustices, and then accountability through mechanisms such as the finance for justice – this includes a range of issues such as mobility justice for refugees, finance for loss and damage for states, adaptation finance to communities, as well as reducing fossil fuel dependency, increasing decarbonisation investments, and a range of measures to bring down carbon emissions rapidly without externalising costs. These are constitutive components of climate reparations for colonial legacies of climate change (Burkett, 2009; Sheller, 2020). Such tactics generally eschew market capitalism, especially green capitalism tied to climate colonialism results in land grabbing, sacrifice zones, biofuels and mining dispossessions, water contamination, and so forth. These can further compound and generate new intersectional sufferings and harms (Táíwò, 2019; Zografos & Robbins, 2020). For instance, water contamination from oil spills or extractive economies, as well as climate-induced drought, can exacerbate household water insecurities that increase domestic water-provisioning burdens on women and girls in many places (Sultana, 2014). This impacts individual, household, and societal wellbeing and progress over time. Even solutions like GND (Green New Deal) can reproduce climate colonialism and exacerbate gendered burdens if not undertaken ethically and carefully. A feminist climate justice approach fosters integration of different conceptual and tactical aspects to intentionally and inclusively address climate reparations.

Relatedly, existing global governance structures can also benefit from insights of feminist climate justice. It has been posited that current frameworks and structures are complicit in maintaining neocolonialism and reproducing discourses and material realities that produce hierarchical relationships and barriers (Burman, 2017; Mahony & Endfield, 2018). Current modalities and institutional arrangements have been critiqued for being inadequate in addressing critical climate justice concerns internationally and intersectionally. Existing scholarship has documented critiques of community governance, participation, capitalist growth as the solution, and apolitical resilience discourses that are replete in climate policies (Leach et al., 2021). These approaches are often gender-insensitive or lacking in reckoning with investigating and addressing more complex findings that emerge from intersectional analyses. Undertaking an intersectional feminist

climate justice approach would help with improved planning, project design, networking, advocacy, and public discourse. Concrete differences need to be recognised and tackled systemically, or else restorative measures will ultimately fail, collapsing under the weight of their own inequality.

Thus, reframing climate debates with insights from various feminist insights and solidarity praxis helps to unearth and redress root causes instead of seeking out quick techno-managerialist solutions. It confronts patriarchy in communities, institutions, and policy-making, and thereby recognises the importance of intersectional gender analysis, disaggregated data collection, ethical research designs, collaborative planning, and critical reflexivity. Such endeavors focus on regenerative economies and systemic solutions that account for and financially support care, commoning, repair, and reparation. This raises awareness on interconnections across places and issues, not isolated domestic solutions but accounts for international externalities and impacts. Relatedly, it recognises that global racial justice is integral to intersectional feminist climate justice. Ultimately, decentering historically powerful voices towards recentering of marginalised voices and lived wisdoms of communities are valued, and self-determination and collectives building are promoted.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Critical climate justice is ultimately about obligations and ethical relations with peoples and ecosystems. Climate change is a moral problem and a justice concern, not only an economic or scientific one (Clark & Gunaratnam, 2019; Gardiner, 2014). It is not only about finances or technology, but a shift in mindsets and framing of issues. Critical climate justice is as much about development, democracy, and citizenship as about international politics, financing, geographies, and histories. Attention to feminist insights for critical climate justice encourages policy-makers and citizens to approach climate change in more comprehensive ways. It calls for accountability to intersectional feminist analysis, so that lived experiences and wisdom of differently situated subjects are heard and heeded, and appropriate and inclusive policies and programs are planned. Paying attention to various power relations in any context is central to fine-tuning and addressing the inequalities, marginalisations, and vulnerabilities reinforced through disruptive climate patterns and socio-ecological changes across scales and sites.

Advancing critical climate justice by making it more meaningful and inclusive thus becomes about recognising and reducing intersectional harms that occur both within and across communities, and reframing debates. Climate justice research and action necessitate deploying intersectional approaches for comprehensive accountability of various systemic injustices that overlap and compound. Decision-makers paying attention to gender, race, class, and other axes of difference can thus avoid reductionist solutions to pursue more equitable ones without cookie-cutter approaches or “one size fits all.” Addressing issues of colonial harm and racial harm remain central to critical climate justice solidarity praxis. This necessitates learning from a broad array of anti-oppression scholarships such as anti-colonial, decolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and Indigenous scholarship and action. Critical climate justice praxis thereby encourages accounting for research ethics, knowledge co-production, and solidarity building, all of which continue to be enriched by critical feminist scholarship and praxis.

There are no easy or quick fixes in pursuing critical climate justice. There is imperative to reimagine to configure pathways forward. Different changes and challenges will need various forms of actions and policies, not one universalist truth or solution. Systems change needed for critical climate justice entails confronting capitalist extractivism and climate colonialism, whereby collaboration becomes vital. Given contemporary events and concerns, it is important to revolutionize how people think about climate change towards a more critical climate justice praxis of solidarities and collective action that can draw from feminist and other critical bodies of scholarship and activism. Ultimately, there is no singular or ideal climate justice for all, no singular arrival point, but a becoming, of doing more and better, unlearning to relearn, and continually taking stock in various collectivities for equitable and transformative praxis.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were created.

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