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Autor*innen: Cardoso Vasconcelos, Isadora; Mbungu, Grace Kageni; Cortés Valderrama, Gina

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[Dachzeile]

Historical responsibilities of colonialism: Gender justice as a path to climate justice

The notion of development, or what we understand as prosperity, whether of a country, group, or individual, has been shaped throughout history by social constructs that stem from colonialism as an ideology. Colonialism is entrenched in our society as a monocultural form of domination and understanding and shaping the world. Its influence extends to the ways in which we interact with each other and with nature. It has determined the means of production, the commodification of bodies, the social value assigned to humanity, social roles and their hierarchisation. It is this same model that today gives free rein to the overexploitation of nature, territories, bodies, and identities, mainly in countries located in the Global South. Climate justice considers the past and ongoing impacts and effects of colonialism in the development of national, regional, and local strategies for climate action. The broader climate justice movement seeks to ensure that states are held accountable for historical and ongoing gender and climate injustices, and that necessary reparations are made. However, achieving systemic transformation under the banner of climate justice requires that we deconstruct power relations and gender norms from an intersectional and community-based perspective and approach. After all, without gender justice, climate justice cannot be achieved.

Climate justice as a call for historical responsibilities

The occupation of land and the exploitation of nature, including humans, characterized the beginning of a way of perceiving, understanding, and applying development strategies. Since colonization, the displacement of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities and the imposition of an elitist hierarchy that emphasized gender inequalities and imposed heteronormativity has negated the fundamental rights of these populations and assigned women in all their diversity, along with trans and non-binary people, a lower status than cis-gender men. Countries that are today classified as 'developed' (mainly in the Global North) made [indiscriminate use of natural and human resources, leading to violent appropriation, extractivism, control, exploitation, the homogenisation and erasure of peoples, cultures, territories, and nature](#), marking the beginning of an environmental crisis. The occupied and exploited, those that have contributed the least to environmental degradation, continue to suffer the greatest impacts. Proponents of [climate justice](#) accordingly seek to broaden

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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the scope of climate action to ensure that it addresses the key challenges of human rights and social inequality.

The perpetuation of colonial ideology is an important driver of the extractivist model of development that underpins one of the most pressing challenges of our times: climate change. [Pervasive impacts have resulted from observed increases in the frequency and intensity of climate and weather extremes](#), which are expected to increase in extent and magnitude in the coming decades. [Regions in the Global South in particular have experienced losses and damages](#)—understood as permanent and irreversible losses to livelihoods, homes and territory – as well as impacts, such as the loss of culture, identity, and biodiversity, which cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

It is against this background that [climate justice has emerged – both as a concept and a movement](#). Climate justice [recognizes the root causes of the climate crisis](#) and acknowledges that, within the multiple phases of production and consumption processes, humans in power have exploited Earth's resources and abused the rights of colonized communities and subaltern groups in the pursuit of their own ends and as a means to maintain the status quo. Climate justice recognizes the historical responsibility of richer nations and corporations for the deterioration of our common territories through the historical and current indiscriminate accumulation of wealth by burning fossil fuels and extracting other common goods from our ecosystems. The movement has prompted younger generations to speak out against the intergenerational injustices perpetrated by previous generations, which have benefited from exploitative activities with no regard for the consequences for current and future generations.

Not vulnerable - agents of change!

Women and girls in all their diversity are often disproportionately affected by climate change impacts. The unequal distribution of responsibilities and opportunities among men and women, as well as persisting structural and customary norms, intersecting forms of oppression such as racism, LGBTQI-phobia and ableism, shape the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change. When a crisis occurs, gender inequalities are even more acutely highlighted. For example, [women, young girls, and boys of colour face a greater risk of sexual violence](#) and are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and other humanitarian crises as a result. Intersectionality, understood as a prism for seeing how various forms of inequality operate together and exacerbate each other, provides a tool for critically [analyzing how these intersections contribute to specific experiences of discrimination and/or privilege](#). Multiple discriminations based on gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status, (dis)abilities, or academic level, have [historically denied womxn land tenure rights, access to financial, technical, and institutional resources](#), education, and political participation. Instead, women and girls are often left behind with vital but undervalued roles caring for their families and communities – reducing women's availability to participate in multiple spaces and leading to their marginalization in many contexts.

As the last report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on [Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#) (2022) argues, focusing on the false premise that women are inherently vulnerable because of their biological sex ignores the complex, dynamic and intersecting power relations and other structural causes of inequality. The same report also makes it clear that “climate justice comprises justice that links development and human rights to achieve a rights-based approach to

addressing climate change". Hence, to achieve climate justice, it is imperative to guarantee women's rights - to achieve gender justice.

Subindexes (health and survival, education and attainment, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment) used by the [World Economic Forum](#) to track gender gaps since 2006 show that while progress has been made towards closing the gender gap globally, challenges remain. These are likely to be heightened by unfolding climate change impacts and the effects of the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). A striking detail in the [2021 report](#) is the number of years it will take to close the remaining gender gaps in all four subindexes. These gaps, which persist in countries of the Global South and within marginalized groups in countries of the Global North, reflect existing social, economic, and cultural conditions that impede efforts to address gender injustice. Ditching narratives that position women as vulnerable and merely emphasize their inclusion in established patriarchal systems is an important step towards forging transformative pathways based on gender-responsive approaches that aim to change structural inequalities and deliver cross-cutting benefits for human and ecological well-being.

Bottom-up approaches for gender-responsive climate action

[Women are powerful agents of change whose knowledge, resistance, experiences, and expertise all contribute to efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change.](#) Diverse solutions for a more sustainable future exist, many of which are derived from ancestral technologies. These solutions promote women's democratic rights and participation while contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals. They are community and context-based, which supports decentralized climate actions. They recognize the value and contribution of traditional knowledge, making a difference in communities and transforming national policy frameworks. These solutions already exist in different regions and, most importantly, at the local level. While the road to gender justice is long and begins at different starting points depending on the context and issues at hand, learning from and replicating ongoing actions and processes initiated and led by womxn can add valuable layers that could further success and sustainability. You can find out more about diverse womxn-led, bottom-up approaches to climate action through the [database of the Gender Just Climate Solutions](#).

The way forward

The way out of the climate crisis and the intersecting injustices it exacerbates lies in the transformation of colonial models and structures in all areas of life as well as necessary reparations. Gender justice, along with the drivers of climate justice, demands actions that respect human rights, in particular the rights of women and girls in all their diversity. Concrete alternatives to the dominant development model already exist on the ground where real solutions come to life. These community and context-based initiatives stand in contrast with individualistic (e.g., personal carbon footprinting) or commercial climate solutions (e.g., electric cars), which tend to maintain structural inequalities for the benefit of a few. Women-led initiatives around the world are making it clear: forging a path towards a safe, clean, and healthy environment requires us to integrate diverse forms of knowledge, foster respect for cultural and spiritual identity, and eliminate multiple forms of oppression.