

GLOBAL SOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “WHY THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A FEMINIST ISSUE”



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INTRODUCTION

While women and people from the Global South, especially in Africa will bear the biggest brunt of climate change, little is said about why that is. However, the continued absence of these voices in policy and otherwise discussions about climate action further reinforces existing barriers to guaranteeing that climate change solutions are contextual and applicable.

The reasons for this range from the historically unequal power dynamics between people from the Global North and South, complex cultural and social dynamics that influence gender norms, legislation, among others. Without addressing these institutionalized and systemic causes of inequality, we find that despite pushing to have women and marginalized people from the Global South included in different processes, they remain unable to effectively participate or transform their realities.

This note titled ***“Why the climate crisis is an African feminist issue”*** was developed by Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMWA) under the auspices of the Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) programme – a lobby and advocacy programme which is led by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Netherlands and implemented by Fundación Avina, Hivos, Slum Dwellers International (SDI), SouthSouthNorth (SSN), AMWA under the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ *“Power of Voices”*. The programme aims at ensuring that by 2025, local civil society, feminists, environmentalists, climate activists, small scale farmers, and underrepresented persons like indigenous women will have a central role as creators, facilitators and advocates of innovative and inclusive climate solutions.

Under this programme, AMWA is working to advance feminist climate justice approaches in order to address the climate crisis in a just and inclusive way. AMWA’s approach to climate justice centers the most marginalized and calls for the re-imagining of usual gender mainstreaming strategies in climate action and integrates a feminist analysis to address existing climate problems and advance just and inclusive solutions.

FEMINISM AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS?

Feminism is about challenging and transforming power structures that allow for inequalities to persist. To challenge “patriarchy” as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women, effectively requires that we challenge other systems of oppression and exploitation that frequently mutually support each other. Feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It’s about respecting the diversity of women’s experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to liberate all women to enjoy their full rights.

It is widely agreed that the Global South, which is least responsible for the climate crisis faces the biggest brunt of the climate crisis. It is also widely agreed that women will also be hardest hit by the effects of the crisis because they are already primarily more vulnerable than their male counterparts –as they constitute the majority of the world’s poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, women disproportionately face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity. Those charged with the responsibility to secure water, food and fuel for cooking face the greatest challenges. When coupled with unequal access to resources and to decision-making processes, limited mobility places women in rural areas in a position where they



are disproportionately affected by climate change. When governments, climate activists, and environmentalists do not recognize the gendered impacts of the climate crisis, the humanitarian impacts of the climate crisis squarely fall on women.

In this note, we acknowledge that the climate crisis is a societal challenge with ethical and human rights impacts occurring alongside a number of already existing inequalities based on gender, socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, sexual orientation, and age. This marginalization has become a self-fulfilling cycle, especially amidst situations of global crises such as the climate change crisis which is extensively ravaging, especially the most marginalized and is causing deeper inequalities. Women and men are experiencing climate change differently¹, as gender inequalities persist around the world, affecting the ability of individuals and communities to adapt.

Our approach to climate justice centers the most marginalized and calls for the re-imagining of usual gender mainstreaming strategies in climate action by integrating feminist intersectional approaches, theories and principles. We call for emphasis to be placed on building women's socioeconomic and cultural agency in coping with climate change impacts instead of merely seeking handouts. We emphasize the need to address the power dynamics and structures that influence the pace of change and levels of existential insecurities, the distribution of resources and a host of benefits on current and future outcomes. This is because, what counts as climate risks is ultimately shaped by the realities and power structures that exist at various levels. In this regard, we seek to advance the notion that addressing the climate crisis in a just and inclusive way requires that we move beyond just addressing the symptoms, and seek to address the root causes in order to overcome it once and for all.

In doing this, we take note of the role that the current economic world order which is heavily anchored in neoliberal-capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, neocolonialism and other isms, continues to play in driving the climate crisis. Its institutionalized and systemic influences include the historically unequal power dynamics between people from the Global North and South, complex cultural and social dynamics that influence gender norms, legislation, among others. Mitigating/ undoing the crisis cannot therefore be fully effective without addressing the extractive and exploitative nature of powerful neoliberal capitalists who are driven by profit, and convey little regard to the need to protect, preserve and conserve the natural ecosystem. The justification for this is imbedded in the reality that the Global South, particularly Africa's underdeveloped industrial sector has only contributed a mere 1% increase in GHG emissions since 1901 compared to their Global North counterparts.

Existing climate governance does not adequately support inclusivity. On the contrary, as the climate crisis worsens, civic space is shrinking. The voices of local people, particularly women are rarely heard when climate decisions are being made, with women, youth, indigenous people and other marginalized groups being the most noticeably absent - and yet it is these groups, especially in the Global South, that will bear the brunt of climate change impacts.



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¹ Gender and climate change, IUCN, <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-briefs/gender-and-climate-change> Accessed 04 April 2021



This attitude is pervasive beyond decision making. Climate finance is repeatedly failing to reach local solutions and the people and nature that need it most. Currently, only 1 out of 10 USD of climate finance goes to local-level climate action. This is a troublesome trend as local communities and civil society organizations are often innovative agents of change. They take highly contextualized and integrated development action that benefit from critical local and ecosystem knowledge, yield greater and more inclusive social and economic returns, and are ultimately more sustainable in the long run. Hence, they are indispensable in the global fight against climate change.

Around Africa, marine heatwaves have become more frequent since the 20th century and are projected to increase. Relative sea level has increased at a higher rate than global mean sea level around Africa over the last 3 decades. Relative sea-level rise is virtually certain to continue around Africa, contributing to increases in the frequency and severity of coastal flooding in low-lying areas to coastal erosion and along sandiest coasts.

THE CLIMATE CRISIS: WHAT IT IS AND HOW WE GOT HERE!

The 6th report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2021 revealed that in all land regions in Africa, the mean temperatures and hot extremes emerged above natural variability, relative to 1850–1900. The report indicates that the rate of surface temperature increase has generally been more rapid in Africa than the global average, with human-induced climate change being the dominant driver. Observed increases in hot extremes (including heatwaves) and decreases in cold extremes (including cold waves) are projected to continue throughout the 21st century with additional global warming. Around Africa, marine heatwaves have become more frequent since the 20th century and are projected to increase. Relative sea level has increased at a higher rate than global mean sea level around Africa over the last 3 decades. Relative sea-level rise is virtually certain to continue around Africa, contributing to increases in the frequency and severity of coastal flooding in low-lying areas to coastal erosion and along sandiest coasts. The frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events are projected to increase almost everywhere in Africa with additional global warming.

A study by the Lancet Planetary Health, Volume 4, Issue 9 published in September 2020 that quantified national responsibility for climate breakdown found that the global north was responsible for 92% of excess global emissions. However, an analytical study by the UN Human Rights Council revealed that despite this, it is African people, and particularly African women who have had to bear the brunt of the insecurity and damage caused by unpredictable seasonal patterns² that destroy their crops and water sources, harm health, cripple food sovereignty, force greater poverty, and expose them to violence and conflict. Consequently,

² UN Human Rights Council (2019). 'Analytical study on gender-responsive climate action for the full and effective enjoyment of the rights of women'. UN, <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/41/26>



this has entrapped, especially women in a cycle of intergenerational inequality and discrimination. When climate change occurs, these same women face insufferable pollution³, displacement⁴ and dispossession⁵.

Climate change is considered to be the biggest threat to the modern world⁶. The climate change crisis is not something that just happened. This is why it is important to contextualize it, particularly as Africans, and address it as a crisis occurring as a result of existing power structures. In particular, specific consideration must be placed on the visible and invisible barriers, within majorly, global economic power structures that have largely contributed to this crisis.

These structures are rooted in historical and current influences that are dictating and propagating policies aimed at privatization, deregulation, and liberalization. The current system as it is, promotes; massive natural resource extraction, the forced shift from internally generated traditional and regenerative systems and solutions, and profit driven industrial scale farming systems which promote reliance of chemical fertilizers and undermine indigenous farming systems and food security and sovereignty. This system is rooted in neoliberal policies aimed at deregulating government's involvement in development – even to regulate actions of corporations in public interest and the environment, liberalizing of trade and markets, and privatizing state enterprises and social services.

It is also important to reflect on the ideologies of neocolonialism and patriarchy and on the legacies of colonialism and imperialism whose influence in economic global systems that are built on hierarchies and center profit over people are what are increasingly determining Africa's development. This system which also centers capitalism has been pushed by western governments, and global financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF has now also permeated into NGOs, philanthropists, and individual thought processes, among others. All these have had dire consequences on the lives of African people in all their diversities and their environment.

By locating the current climate crisis within the continuum of systems of oppression, the world, and especially the global South countries in Africa will be able to address the question of how and why the people on the continent, particularly women are disproportionately affected by the crisis, and then prioritize the advancement of solutions that ensure that the persistent causes are addressed.

While it has been widely acknowledged that Africa has been and will be hit the hardest by the climate crisis, it has not been fully elucidated why that is. This is why the responses to climate change must be assessed with the full understanding of the ways in which the climate crisis affects different socio-economic, cultural, and political realities and further reinforces existing inequalities.



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3 WECAN (n.d.). 'Why women'. WECAN International., <https://www.wecaninternational.org/why-women>
4 Sarkar, Soumya (2020). 'Women suffer the most from climate displacement'. India Climate Dialogue, <https://indiadialogue.net/2020/07/13/women-suffer-the-most-from-climate-displacement/>
5 Löw, Christine (2020). 'Under cover of the pandemic, stealth land grabs are ongoing'. OpenDemocracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/under-cover-pandemic-stealth-land-grabs-are-ongoing-india/>
6 Climate Change 'Biggest Threat Modern Humans Have Ever Faced', World-Renowned Naturalist Tells Security Council, Calls for Greater Global Cooperation, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14445.doc.htm>



Addressing the climate crisis must recognize and seek to put an end to the rising numbers of deforestation, especially within the Global South, as well as put an end to the push for small scale farmers to adopt improved seeds that heavily rely on the utilization of chemical fertilizers as opposed to environmentally friendly, indigenous solutions like agro ecology to increase their productivity.



Africa despite its continued contributions to the world by way of its food, land, natural resources and people continues to be situated at the periphery. Those on the margins of our society have suffered the most as a result. The consequences, such as increased commodification of land, water, food have particularly affected indigenous, poor and rural women, gender expansive persons, disabled and other people, especially owing to pre-existing marginalization and discrimination against them.

This is why the climate crisis must be addressed not as a single issue crisis, because it would be dishonest to imagine that the solutions to the climate crisis can be assessed using a single issue lens. Addressing the climate crisis requires a feminist intersectional approach. A feminist intersectional approach to climate justice simply integrates an intersectional analysis in the feminist approach by acknowledging and addressing the root causes and effects of climate change, and recognizing the full spectrum of the numerous challenges that communities face. The climate crisis exacerbates existing inequalities. Those already marginalized will end up bearing the biggest brunt of it.

Addressing the climate crisis must recognize and seek to put an end to the rising numbers of deforestation, especially within the Global South, as well as put an end to the push for small scale farmers to adopt improved seeds that heavily rely on the utilization of chemical fertilizers as opposed to environmentally friendly, indigenous solutions like agro ecology to increase their productivity. The Hunger Strike: The Climate and Food Vulnerability Index⁷ published by Christian Aid revealed that the 10 most food-insecure countries in the world generate less than half a ton of carbon dioxide per person. Collectively, they generate just 0.08% of total global carbon dioxide.

⁷ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/Hunger-strike-climate-and-food-vulnerability-index.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Northern countries must take responsibility for where we are. We must stress that African countries did not create this problem; despite being set to inherit its effects. Unfortunately, we continue to see language, narratives and actions that contradict the truth of how we got here and even more so, how we remedy this. Unless we recognize the fundamental humanity of all people, particularly African people in all their diversities and acknowledge our right to live a life of full dignity, the solutions that are peddled will continue to treat the western countries as exceptional and stigmatize African ones.
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2. We must move beyond the climate rhetoric gap, and address the structural causes of the climate crisis, quickly. For Africa specifically, we must address the residual legacies of colonialism that further cemented these hierarchies in our African countries. This includes addressing how gender, sex, class and age are weaponized in ways that have created these great imbalances. That also means we must address how the wealth of the now wealthy countries vs. the Global South came to be which ties directly to colonialism, the industrial revolution and how that has influenced the core fabric of our societies.
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3. We need to be talking more about halting fossil fuel extraction, about the effects of corporate greed and the mass extractivism and depletion of natural resources, about the politics of hunger and how food, water and basic necessities for human survival are being commodified and how African farmers are feeding the continent continue to have huge taxes levied upon them, while the big multinational industrial farmers, they are the ones getting tax breaks.
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4. We need to be challenging international trading systems which dictate that the Global South cannot adequately invest in those who feed us, resisting private property rights around seeds that are being pushed by big corporations.
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5. We must center the voices and aspirations of those on the frontlines of the crisis and allow for the self-determination of communities that have been so extracted upon. Who accesses funding, the strings attached to it and how that money is utilized has a big role to play in all this. We must put local communities at the forefront of determining which solutions are contextually applicable. The solutions lie beyond the short-term calculations that tend to be unable to think beyond the next financial report and pleasing donors, refusing to challenge the status quo, if the earth as we know it is, is to survive. For us on the continent, our solutions must reclaim African indigenous knowledge that centers community. This means that those who work and till the land, grow our food, fight to protect our natural resources, understand the balances of nature and human must also be protected. These are women, particularly indigenous, poor, rural-based women, children and others that are often not given the acknowledgement, protection and support they deserve.
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6. We should be stressing renewable community owned energy, solutions like agroecology, food sovereignty and resisting solutions that allow states, corporations and global powers to evade accountability. This requires that we also work to transform the structural inequalities that dictate, whose voice is erased and ultimately, who suffers the most.
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CONCLUSION

Women are not a minority and yet they continue to be deliberately minoritized by systems that have been put in place. The solutions to the climate crisis require us to radically reimagine the ways in which we live and begin to break down existing power structures that promote oppressive systems. We must act now and quickly even if it requires us to sit with uncomfortable truths. The failures and effects of neoliberal capitalism on the continent are obvious, even more so now with the COVID -19 pandemic.



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