



Ensuring Accountability for Feminist Climate Justice

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Feminist Climate Justice Think Pieces

No. 3

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1. Introduction

The need for a rapid transition to renewable sources of energy, while also increasing energy access, continues to be a major theme at climate negotiations. In parallel, questions of climate justice have surfaced as extremely important. Injustices between the Global North and South dominated international negotiations

at recent COP meetings. The growing references to a Just Transition as well as gender justice and the importance of addressing the rights and claims of indigenous groups signal a desire to root social and equity concerns into debates on climate justice in international forums.¹

2. What do just transitions really mean?

A framework practiced and created by Indigenous movements, the term Just Transitions was adopted by Trade Unions and labor movements in the United States in the 1970s to encompass a range of social interventions needed to secure workers' jobs and livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production. The concept spread in the 1970s from the United States to trade unions globally and there were efforts by actors from different areas to bridge the gap between workers, environmentalists and communities and to foster principles of social and environmental justice. It was not until the decade of 2000 that the concept was linked to climate policy (Stavis et al., 2020) and to climate justice.

While the spread of the term 'Just Transition' is to be welcomed, it has also come to represent different meanings. It is not as easy to know what Just Transitions stand for, who is behind it, the underlying politics and who it is for (c.f. Stevis et al., 2020). One problem is that of different levels or scales of justice. In climate policy, mentions of equity and fairness recur mostly at the international level. In most countries, there is less to no policy discussion of what that might entail at the national level or the measures that will be taken to

ensure justice for different groups² – apart from jobs for some men in sectors such as coal or where new technologies are introduced. Second, questions of land central to justice tend to get marginalized by a focus on certain kinds of jobs. Injustices due to huge land use changes as new (and renewable) technologies are introduced in rural areas also need to be addressed but are rarely addressed when referring to just transitions. Changing land-use, for renewables or for minerals for sustainable technologies can entail erasing cultures and knowledge systems embedded in the land. Third, for women, especially in indigenous and rural communities, balancing personal struggles for an equal place in their communities vis a vis struggles for justice for the larger community in relation to state agencies or companies, has always entailed balancing different agendas (Arora-Jonsson, 2013; Dubey and Saxena, 2023). Climate justice and proclamations of just transitions require that thinking and practice on transitions is gendered and incorporates feminist thinking and approaches.

The questions of what the proper frame to ensure and deliver justice might be and who, or whose interests ought to count are crucial for climate justice.

1 This piece builds on my previous work and in particular, on a recent book with colleagues: Arora-Jonsson, S., Michael, K., & Shrivatsava, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Just Transitions: Gender and Power in India's Climate Politics*. Routledge.

2 For example, this is very evident as can be seen in the absence of gender and intersecting dimensions of power climate policymaking of most countries (IPPC, Gender Box). An analysis of adaptation policies in Sweden shows that when it is referred to, it is done so in general terms (Arora-Jonsson & Wahlström 2023) or as in Asia and Africa where women are mainly as vulnerable victims of climate change (Rao et al 2019; Jayaram, D., & Chaudhry, 2023).

Justice is layered and connected. Actors who speak of justice in one forum can disregard it in others. Justice at one scale can easily become and reinforce injustice at another. For example, the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund was a victory for governments in the Global South. Whether the measures taken as a result of the fund will translate to justice for people living in remote areas and subjected to calamities is not a given.

As we show in our book, *Just Transitions: Gender and Power in India's Climate Politics* (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2023), women and marginal groups such as indigenous communities are in particular negatively affected. North/South inequalities as well as within countries are reproduced not only through private companies but also through climate projects. Balancing the urgency of global climate action with the rights and needs of people on the ground remains a dilemma. In many parts of the world, across the Global South and North, a significant share of the minerals needed for the energy transition are located

in environmentally and socially sensitive areas where local and indigenous communities have lived and worked. These places, while often at the receiving end of decisions made at the national and global scales, are too riven by inequalities that contribute to the current unjust system across scales. Actors, such as Global South governments, that argue for justice at the international scale can and do deny it to marginal groups within their own countries.

Thus, Just Transitions, go beyond jobs for workers and are impossible without addressing questions of land, water, and forests on which a large majority of the people depend and unequal gendered relations that are linked to work, ownership and care of the environment. The disjunctures and productive tensions across these scales need to be addressed for justice for all. There can be no transition to a sustainable society without justice. Justice demands that disparities between countries and within societies are addressed and that there need to be differentiated solutions at all levels.

3. Transitioning away from inequalities: Governance and gender mainstreaming

Feminists have long been at the forefront of conceptualizing justice, their work grounded in analyses of gender, used to study relations of power between men and women but also how these identities are complicated by other dimensions such as indigeneity, class, ethnicity, sexuality or age. Gendered analyses are vital in thinking through how power relations work across scale and how they may be expressed through law, discourses, attitudes and actors working across scale. What is clear is that it is not enough to work towards a transition, we also need a transition away from gendered and intersecting inequalities in our societies. For that feminist work offers an important framework.

Close attention to governance (and inclusion/democracy) is vital for climate justice. The failure

on the part of climate interventions all over the world to involve local communities and especially women in discussions on climate programs and in addressing social differences that shape people's livelihoods decisions and outcomes, including but not limited to gender (see Carr et al., 2016; Sandstrom and Strapasson, 2017) appears to be repeating past environmental governance.

I think of governance for climate justice in two ways (Brush, 2003). We need to depart from an analysis of the 'gender of governance,' that is, the ways in which practices and assumptions of gender difference and dominance organize institutions, capacities and ideologies of climate governance. It is an acknowledgement that policies in fact

often depart from an androcentric and other bias while purporting to be universal or neutral.

In such a case gender mainstreaming and insisting on a gendered lens on institutions and policies as well as gender budgeting is crucial in order to circumvent the inbuilt prejudice and gendered discrimination. Gender mainstreaming thus falls under what may be called the ‘governance of gender,’ (c.f. Ibid) that is how government bodies and social policies produce and police the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. This can go two ways – it can enforce or it can be used to undermine privilege and discrimination in everyday life.

In environmental governance in the past, the ‘governance of gender’ has often meant adding women to existing structures and organizations that continue to be dominated by certain groups of men. It is clearly not enough to ‘add women and stir.’ Women have often been expected to join organizations and accommodate themselves to existing norms and structures rather than that the structures be changed

to accommodate their subjective positions, needs and ideas to redress disadvantage (Arora-Jonsson, 2013: 187). Thus, a close look at the work of institutions and organizations across all levels is crucial – from the international to the local.

But gender mainstreaming has also been an important tool for gender advocates in environmental and climate policies and projects. Gender mainstreaming has looked different in different places. It has sometimes been phrased as needing to consider gender in policies and it has also entailed concrete strategies such as gender budgeting and affirmative action. While there has been considerable critique of gender mainstreaming given that in many places it has been co-opted or subverted to reproduce unequal gendered norms, it has also led to a silent revolution in the awareness of gendered power relations as important to address and in opening up a discussion of intersecting dimensions of power in environmental and climate projects (Arora-Jonsson and Basnett, 2018; see Arora-Jonsson, 2014 for an overview of literature on gender mainstreaming).

4. Feminist accountability in climate justice

In this section, I discuss accountability approaches and tools that gender equality advocates have used at different levels to influence the response to ensure climate justice. They show what an accountability framework on feminist climate justice would look like – one that is sensitive to particular contexts but also recognizes how relations across scale affect justice on the ground?

4.1 Accounting for work that remains invisible

As Chantel Carr (2022, p. 5 and ad passim) writes evocatively, ‘It is society that is broken, not just the climate. Society needs repairing. Yet, we need to do the repairing by drawing on the resources that society has, the skills that people know many of which are ignored.’

There are three aspects to this invisible work. First, a great deal of productive work carried out in environments needs greater attention and recognition. The invisible work that upholds the current system and where women bear the major burden needs to be acknowledged and addressed in policymaking but also in projects that assume or build on the work without acknowledging it. Feminist economists in particular have long highlighted this invisible work and the need to address it. A recent example where this has been made possible and has had important consequences is a project by Brazilian women farmers who worked with feminist researchers to use time-use diaries to visibilize their work on family farms, enabling them to access govt funding and support. The women began to log how much of their production from the family agriculture is sold, given away,

exchanged or consumed. It helped change not only how they themselves and their partners viewed their work but also enabled them to access governmental funding by making visible their large contributions to agribusinesses in the area (UN-Women, 2015).

A second aspect of the invisibility, and so far disregarded in relation to discussions on labor, is the unpaid and acknowledged work of reproduction and care being carried out in environments and community spaces, now all the more acute in times of climate transitions. Early feminists working on the environment (Fortmann and Nhira, 1992; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999; Rocheleau, 1994; Shiva, 1989) highlighted such work of care that women do in environments that remains unseen in official accounts and programs, even today (for example, Graddy-Lovelace, 2018). This work in-between spaces (such as planting on the edges of fields or in understories, taking care of community spaces and events and so on) and in-between times of other chores in the household and fields, demonstrates the inextricability of care at home in the private sphere with what happens in the public sphere. Women both in an individual capacity and in collectives through their environmental work erase the boundaries of the public (work) and private (care) (Arora-Jonsson, 2013, p. 221) that climate politics seem unaware of. Women mobilize important knowledges and skills that lie beyond the existing frames of climate change adaptation and mitigation that have much to offer for the care and repair needed for transitions (Carr, 2022). Such work and the blurring of the private and public that it entails needs acknowledgement in climate policies and projects and for climate justice.

Third, according to a report for the ILO, 61 percent of the global labor force works in the informal economy and a significant percentage of those employed in the informal economy are women who are also responsible for care work in the home (Adatti et al., 2018, p. 73). Feminist economists have long highlighted how care work (especially women's) is inextricable with formal work, both in rural and urban settings (Adatti et al., 2018).

They have criticized policy interventions that encourage women's participation in markets and paid employment in a context where women remain responsible for reproductive and household care work (Elson, 2017; Folbre, 1994). This is clear in climate projects that advocate the inclusion of women's work in markets without acknowledging their many constraints (Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2015).

Not merely the formal workplace but informal work in the environment as well as the many contexts tied to the formal needs attention when devising interventions for climate transitions. Complex interdependencies between the private and public and between men and women cannot be disregarded. For example, research in Tanzania (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2016) revealed that restricted access to the forests because of climate programs meant not only that men lost their livelihoods but that the pressure on women doubled in order to compensate for it which was completely unaccounted for in climate programs.

This calls for accountability to gender and intersecting categories in programs and projects, and as feminist research has pointed out, to the need for accompanying social policies as well as institutions that are aware of how the formal and informal and production and reproduction/care intersect.

An example of an attempt to begin to address the skewed ownership of land between men and women even in countries that have laws that demand equal ownership of land is an innovative practice in the collection of data in Sweden. To highlighted women's hidden contributions to the running of farms as part of their everyday work, in the statistics that the Department of Agriculture gathers on farms, they have began to count not only those who own the farm but also began to ask who else was involved in its running. So far ownership that is largely held by men has meant that women working on farms not only do not own it but also have a more difficult time in accessing subsidies or loans and in general have much less power in the formal farming sphere.

Through these new surveys, they have shown that although only 17% of women are listed as owners in the green sector, 44% actually manage the farms (Jämställdhetsakademi, 2019). This has been extremely important in recognizing that formal ownership does not have to correspond with the work put into farming. However, how policy will address this is unclear.

4.2 Ensuring that asymmetrical and violent effects of climate change and climate interventions are central to climate policies

Both climate change as well as the response to it have asymmetrical costs for different groups of people. Research on countries in the Global South and in South Asia in particular has shown that many poor women, due to their unequal access to resources and because they are often the ones with the least formal protection will be hit the hardest as climate change has direct negative impacts on their possibilities for making a living (Eastin, 2018; Hans et al., 2021). Differences in equality of access, equality of benefits and equality of risks as well as gender, class, caste and spatial disparities have been made all the clearer in the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Leonardelli et al., 2021).

Violence and especially gendered violence is always close for the poor and especially for women. This also has implications for women's and men's ability to care. Violence is connected across scales. 'Intimate' acts of violence in home persist precisely because they are rooted in other sites (Pain and Staeheli, 2014) such as at the national or international level - as for example, in the organization of power relations that keeps women from decision-making on forestry, climate programs and from aspirations and measures for 'Just Transitions.'

Thus, gendered relations in the public sphere at the global, national or local level are also closely linked to relations in the home and the violence that takes place there. They need to be addressed and dealt with at several levels (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021) and their interconnections need to be taken into account.

There is an urgent need to raise the profile of these issues in climate change discourse to ensure they are enforced and addressed in the implementation of climate programs. Ignorance of these issues can further exacerbate inequalities.

To address this, questions of rights, ownership as well as provision of infrastructure for all is indispensable. As the discussion above indicates, missing infrastructure (water, land rights, irrigation, health care, education and much more) cements inequalities, not only between women and men but between poor and rich, urban and rural and a host of other dimensions.

4.3 Ensuring gendered perspectives in the involvement of non-state actors in governance

Climate strategies today focus a great deal on the work of non-state actors. Private interests in particular are increasingly involved in climate action. Research indicates that these tend to be mainly extractive. The promise of jobs promised by large interventions such as in the solar parks (Narayan et al., 2023), remain unfulfilled. Corporate responsibility for climate change has so far been mainly about charity (Seema Arora-Jonsson et al., 2023), rather than reining in their own profits and often based on local exploitation (Talukdar, 2023). Under what conditions then does the turn to sub/nonstate action reinforce existing power relations in the climate regime, and when might it subvert them?

Women's groups internationally have also tried to call upon the responsibility of corporations to work towards justice. Private interests are most useful where they curb their exploitative practices. However, given that private interests are considered central in climate action today, some have argued that it makes it important for practitioners and academics to engage with them, while maintaining their own critical position. For example, WOCAN, a women's network has devised a methodology to use the tools of carbon trading to include questions of care and justice for women's groups by quantifying and certifying benefits

for women involved in community development and climate projects. The hope is that corporations and businesses could be made to respond to the needs of local economies rather than the other way around (Arora-Jonsson and Gurung, 2023).

This may or may not work, but we need to explore if engaging with private interests and carbon markets may make space for the political agency of women and men and for diverse economic and social contexts and if it may enable a shift in business as usual. There is a need to engage in new experimental economic relations in local contexts that may have the potential to change unequal development and environmental (climate) relationships, in encounters between global development and local lives.

4.4 Dialogue with and support to women's and local collectives is imperative

Help from outside in collective action has been crucial for women in bringing up issues of vital importance for addressing inequalities and for welfare not only for themselves but their communities. Women's networks such as the widows' movements and the farmers' network MAAKAM in India have been instrumental in ensuring equal access to support that normally male farmers get. Again, this is a question across scale. International feminist networks are equally important. It was following years of lobbying and work by feminists at various levels (including UN-Women), in 2001, at the seventh Conference of the Parties in Marrakech, the need to include a gender perspective in the National Climate Change

Adaptation Programs of Action (NAPA) was mentioned for the first time. It was not until nine years later in 2010 and a great deal of work by femocrats and activists, that at the sixteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) in Cancun, the necessity of designing climate change adaptation actions that take into account gender dimensions was emphasized (WEDO and GGCA, 2013).

As Jayati Ghosh (2023) points out, "the identification of some more successful and gender-aware strategies all suggest that success depends crucially on this ability to see, hear and understand how change is playing out in particular grassroots contexts, and taking on board the views and arguments of social movements and local women." Similarly, Michael's (2023) examples of the solar mama program as well as an irrigation program show that technologies such as solar as well as new irrigation methods usually promoted as a solution to climate change are most useful when they are bottom up and take particular heed to gendered relations.

Inspiring stories from villages across India show how communities have mobilized themselves to cope with crises like the unprecedented one brought on by the pandemic. As Kothari (June 5, 2020) writes, these stories demonstrate what self-reliance really means – the revitalising of rural livelihoods, livelihoods, not jobs – about occupations linked to everyday life, social relations, and culture, providing body and soul with satisfaction. They also tell us of the urgent need to move towards localisation and expose the tragedy of a path of 'development' and governance that has not recognised or, worse, taken away the extraordinary agency of ordinary villagers to manage their lives.

5. Conclusion

Climate change is the definition of a 'macro' problem, yet many promising solutions are on a small scale and part of what makes them promising is that they are locally /democratically owned and context specific. Some may ask, how can they be scaled up? The example of Kudumbashree, a poverty eradication and women

empowerment program, is interesting and shows how the state agencies in collaboration with women's groups can play an important role. The program was set up by the government of the state of Kerala in India in 1998 in the context of devolution of powers to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) at the local level.

Learning from the experiments by Alappuzha Municipality and Malappuram in early 1990s, the program is based on a three-tier community network of more than 4.5 million women across the state that forms a support structure that they call the 'Kudumbashree family.' Studies have shown that this has created a social platform for women and strengthened its members (Rajagopal, 2020). The program links the mobilization of credit by local self-help groups to formal bank loans and is supported by a token matching grant from the State government. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the infrastructure provided by this was vital for response and recovery interventions.³

Clearly, people at the brunt of climate change have not part of defining the problem of climate change and yet they continue to bear responsibility for solving it (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2023). Just solutions need to be bottom-up and cannot be conceived separately from solutions proposed at other scales. As White (2019) points out, while feminist, climate justice and decolonial contributions are vital for understanding the labors of transitions, post carbon futures are not simply going to emerge through protests and policy shifts alone. Just Transitions need to be built, fabricated and realized, coded and created. This is important both for immediate and long-term change.

Thus the question about scaling up may not be the right one: It isn't solutions that necessarily need scaling up as what works well in different places is often contextual, though we could learn from one another. But what we do need to scale up is the conviction for justice ... and realizing that it entails responding to the challenges that gender inequality presents in terms of women's labour, gendered violence and accountability gaps.

3 See <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/830>.

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