

### 3 WOMEN AS VULNERABLE: PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Farhana works for an Islamic international aid agency in London. Many of the tasks in her position are directly related to climate change. Her family is originally from Bangladesh, and she started our conversation by telling me that she thinks a great deal about gender and climate change in the context of her organization's environmental work in that country. She went to Bangladesh in 2014 to work in areas that were still recovering from Cyclone Aila, a massive storm that hit multiple South Asian countries in 2009. Farhana noted that "since seeing the disastrous effects of climate change on particularly vulnerable women and children in the communities that flood, I have been passionately campaigning and doing advocacy work for people to invest in climate mitigation and adaptation." Her experience with precariously positioned populations inspired her to focus on climate change work more broadly.<sup>1</sup> In the course of our conversation, she emphasized women's vulnerability to climate change, calling attention to food insecurity, livelihood insecurity, care responsibilities, and the intersection of existing marginalization and climate change adaptation capacity. When I asked for her first thoughts about the phrase "gender and climate change," she responded:

I particularly think of vulnerable women who are living in areas that are most affected by disasters and I also think about how a lot of the women that I have met . . . are struggling to grow their own crops and food, and are struggling to, for example, have safe housing. Some of them are forcibly having to migrate to areas that are, I guess, less prone to disasters—even though Bangladesh is one of the most prone to disasters and flooding in the world. I also think about

how those women have struggled to provide for their children. Essentially because they don't have access to growing their own crops unless they have that intervention from NGOs like ourselves. . . . I've found that, definitely, the communities that I visited, there is a lack of literacy rates in some of those remote and rural parts of Bangladesh and to be able to educate those women and children is probably quite lifesaving.

Her response outlined several of the ways that women in Bangladesh are forced to cope with climate change impacts under already constrained conditions, including coping with food insecurity, insecurity of housing, pressure to migrate, inability to care for families, and lack of education.

Farhana was by no means alone in identifying women as being uniquely burdened by the impacts of climate change. In this chapter, I call this set of ideas a *women-as-vulnerable* discourse. In it women tend to face socio-economic and political discrimination in society, and this leads to them being disproportionately affected by climate change. Storylines related to this include the idea that women have socially mandated responsibilities intersecting with climate change impacts, and they often lack adaptative capacity to effectively deal with climate change. Marginalization leads to women feeling climate change "first and worst." In the words of Allison, a US-based academic,

Women are in the bottom rung of the social structure in a lot of places. And so . . . as climate change makes it harder to do agriculture, makes it so that there are more floods, and more sea level rise, and all that stuff, I think that women will probably get the short end of the stick. Particularly in places where they already get the short end, it's going to be a shorter end.

In this discourse, it is the intersection of women's position in society with the adverse effects of climate change that leads to their vulnerability.

The following sections assess some of the most frequently mentioned ways interviewees said women are likely to "feel" climate change acutely. They discussed connections between vulnerability and divisions of labor as well as experiences during natural disasters. Additionally, the chapter explains the participants' focus on existing structures as facilitating exclusion, marginalization, and climate vulnerability. We then move on to a discussion of specific

categories of marginalization that are present across the interviews. Finally, the chapter suggests a few major reasons for why the women-as-vulnerable discourse might be relatively prevalent in climate change discussions and some implications of using victimhood discourses in general.

## **VULNERABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

Vulnerability is a central concept for environmental scholarship and policy discussions. Scholars identify various entities that are vulnerable to climate change, including species (Pacifci et al. 2015), states (Kim and Wolinsky-Nahmias 2014), and individuals or groups (Adger, Eakin, and Winkels 2009; Bohle, Downing, and Watts 1994; Kelly and Adger 2000; Gaillard 2010).<sup>2</sup> The existing literature identifies indigenous groups (Shearer 2012), those who experience poverty (Formetta and Feyen 2019; Leichenko 2014), underrepresented communities (Shepherd and KC 2015), and women (Azong and Kelso 2021; Denton 2002), among others, as being particularly vulnerable. Those concerned with social or human vulnerability to climate change outline the multifaceted and fluid factors that influence how individuals or communities are susceptible to climate change. Many frameworks view vulnerability as having both bio-physical and human factors, meaning that it goes beyond simple physical exposure to particular conditions (Barnett 2020). Those who are vulnerable tend to be the ones who also experience some form of marginalization in society. For this reason, most conceptualizations of vulnerable people involve not only an increased likelihood of their experiencing the negative impacts of climate change, but also a reduced ability to cope with those impacts (Kelly and Adger 2000). This capacity-based component speaks to the ways marginalization influences some people's ability to address their condition. For instance, imagine two small-scale farmers who are trying to get through a period of drought. The first reacts by drawing on savings and looking to other sources of income as coping mechanisms. The second farmer has very little savings or alternative sources of income and is thus susceptible to the impacts of the drought in a way that the first farmer is not. This aspect of vulnerability requires us to think beyond the immediate, physical experiences of environmental change

to consider issues such as power relations and social embeddedness (Ribot 2010).

Vulnerability is also frequently discussed by feminist scholars, although it is a heavily debated concept in these circles. There has been a great deal of feminist theorizing about whether the label “vulnerable” might serve to disempower those to whom it is applied and how identifying vulnerability might indicate corresponding obligations for states and other actors (Butler 2006; Gentry 2016b; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014). Since the term “vulnerability” originates from the Latin *vulnus*, meaning wound, it calls to mind suffering and fragility, which are part of the human condition. As human beings with fragile bodies, we are prone to suffering physical harms. According to Bryan Turner (2006, 29), one cannot understand vulnerability without reflecting on the fact that we have “an organic propensity to disease and sickness, that death and dying are inescapable, and that aging bodies are subject to impairment and disability.” While all human bodies are vulnerable, our placement in social, economic, and political structures dictate which of us are more susceptible to harm than others. Feminist environmental scholars such as Susan Buckingham (2020, 65) argue that “our bodies can only be understood in relation to their environments, both of which are produced by the interaction between social and physical processes.” Likewise, Iris Marion Young (2002) and Toril Moi (2001) use the idea of “lived bodies” to highlight how gendered embodied selves exist within specific environments. Gender as well as race and class norms mean that women tend to have reduced access to education, livelihood security, political power, among other things, which in turn increases their likelihood of impoverishment and vulnerability (Elborgh-Woytek et al. 2013).

Some existing scholarly work that evaluates gender and climate vulnerability in a specific place highlights how gender norms both vary and how they are similar around the world (Andersen, Verner, and Wiebelt 2017; Huynh and Resurrección 2014; Furusa and Furusa 2014). This work also often stresses that gender works in complex ways. For instance, in a study of the implications of climate-related water scarcity for women in Central Vietnam, Huynh and Resurrección (2014, 226) found that vulnerability to water scarcity is shaped by multiple factors. The study stresses “the

heterogeneity of women as a group and their intersectional dynamics as they adapt to increasing agricultural water scarcity on their rural livelihoods. The findings show that social differences including gender, class, household headship, age and stage of life shape women's differentiated experiences in vulnerability in access to water, to forestland and credit; [these] in turn mark their adaptation differentiation to climate-related agricultural water scarcity." Additionally, a 2017 study across Brazil, Mexico, and Peru found that contrary to the expectations of a simplistic women-as-vulnerable assumption, female-headed households tended to be slightly less vulnerable and more resilient than male-headed households. While the study distinguishes between different types of female-headed and male-headed households and recognizes that there are important variables that influence vulnerability as well as resilience, it does serve as a reminder that assumptions about vulnerability are not always empirically accurate and that careful assessment of the sources of vulnerability are necessary (Andersen et al. 2017).<sup>3</sup> Taken together, this work signals that simplistic portrayals of gendered vulnerability are often partial if not incorrect.

Many scholars have issued strong cautions against treating women as a homogenous vulnerable group in environmental debates (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Cuomo 2011; Denton 2002; MacGregor 2009). They argue that simplistic representations of vulnerability and environmental change both serve to reinforce damaging gender stereotypes and lead to ineffective policymaking—points that will be taken up later in the chapter. Scholars such as these urge us to think critically about the connections between gender and vulnerability in order to identify the processes that lead to some people being more susceptible to environmental harm and less able to address it (Alaimo 2009). This means taking account of multiple forms of marginalization and how they intersect with climate vulnerability (Cuomo 2011).

In addition to work that assesses how gender shapes experiences of environmental vulnerability, scholars examine how gender affects evaluations or assessments of vulnerability (Arora-Jonsson 2011; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Norgaard and York 2005). For instance, some in the fields of social psychology and environmental sociology explore how gendered environmental attitudes could be linked to gendered perceptions of risk

(McCright and Dunlap 2011, Xiao and McCright 2014). According to the “vulnerability thesis,” white men feel less vulnerable to many risks than do women and people of color and are more accepting of such risks. This has been termed the “white male effect,” which is thought to arise due to their dominant position in social structures (McCright and Dunlap 2011). This work indicates that gender norms and roles, alongside race, class, and other factors, influence understanding of environmental change and how likely we are to see ourselves as vulnerable. Research has found a consistent, albeit relatively modest, connection between gender and concern over or perceived seriousness of different types of environmental problems (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Mohai 1997; Sundström and McCright 2014; Xiao and McCright 2014), conceptualizations of environmental and economic trade-offs (McStay and Dunlap 1983), pro-environmental attitudes (Stern, Dietz, and Kalof 1993), and involvement in pro-environmental activities (Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson 2004). Much of this scholarship is focused on the global North. For instance, Aaron McCright (2010) shows that women in the United States express slightly greater concern about climate change than do men. Similarly, Chenyang Xiao and Aaron McCright (2014) find that women in the United States are more concerned than are men about health-related environmental problems. Taken together, the scholarly literature on gender, environmental change, and vulnerability illustrates a complex picture of the sources of vulnerability, how members of society experience vulnerability, and how individuals and scholars understand both of these phenomena.

### **FEELING CLIMATE CHANGE**

Much like the scholars and policymakers who use the concept of vulnerability to understand how climate change is experienced throughout society, interview participants often used a vulnerability discourse when reflecting on whether and how gender and climate change are related. Most interviewees who used the women-as-vulnerable discourse referred to the social construction of gender. Women were seen as vulnerable because of the socially conditioned expectations regarding the appropriate or acceptable roles they should

play. Most avoided depicting women as vulnerable because of some natural or unchangeable condition. Rather, they explained that women likely feel climate change impacts first and worst because of their roles in families and communities. For instance, a majority of participants mentioned women's labor intersecting with climate change impacts at least once in the course of our discussion.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this is the most frequently used storyline in the women-as-vulnerable discourse. Examples include women collecting water or wood/fuel for the household, women cooking or providing food, and women involved in agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Belina, a Brazilian environmental nonprofit worker living in England, brings up some of these tasks:

In developing countries, not all of them, not all at the same time, but women tend to, in very poor countries, they tend to be the ones who are in charge of fetching water, fetching firewood, finding something to eat for dinner, cultivating crops, subsistence farm[ing], and all of those activities are directly impacted by changes in climate. If you were a woman and this is your life, you would notice when the water is getting harder and harder to find, when your crops are not doing so well, or just get withered by a drought, or your day-to-day life is likely going to be hit sooner than that of men.

In identifying several specific forms of labor, most often unpaid labor, that women perform across the world, Belina also indicates that many women might have a specific source of knowledge about climate change due to the tasks that they frequently perform.<sup>6</sup>

Existing research supports these assumptions about gender and labor. On average, women do a disproportionate share of unpaid care work in homes and communities across the globe. This care work consists of (1) specific household tasks such as cleaning, preparing food, collecting firewood and water; and (2) specific activities related to the wellbeing of children, the elderly, and the sick. Globally, men dominate the world of paid work and women dominate the world of unpaid work. In fact, women on average perform three times more unpaid work than men (UNDP 2015). Women frequently provide care within families because cultural norms and expectations shape the division of labor between men and women (Abramovitz 1996; Fraser 1987). This trend toward uneven care burdens holds across both wealthy and poor countries (Bittman et al. 2003; Coffey et al. 2020; Schaeffer

2019). This results in women in general, and mothers in particular, having some of the lowest rates of participation in the labor force, even in states in the global North (Daly 2000; Detraz and Peksen 2018; Marino, Romanelli, and Tasso 2013).

While there are considerable differences in how these trends intersect with political, social, and economic forces in society, gendered patterns of labor still result in specific tasks being more likely to be undertaken by women than by men. When these tasks involve resource use, there is one intersection between climate change impacts and gender, a women-as-resource-users storyline. Climate change results in resources such as water and fuelwood being scarcer in many places (IPCC 2014b). If it is primarily conceived as women's work to secure these resources, women will directly experience the negatives of climate change as they struggle to perform these tasks. Allison, a scholar in the United States, remarked that she thinks of women becoming "even more screwed than they are now, as climate change impacts make it harder to get clean water, or harder to grow crops, and that kind of thing." Gendered patterns of labor, therefore, are understood to contribute to distinct forms of climate vulnerability. This theme dominates much of the existing scholarship on gender and climate change (Dankelman 2002, 2010; Denton 2002).

The women-as-vulnerable discourse also highlights the physical harm that climate change can produce in women in a storyline that I term the gendered-physical-effects-of-climate-change. Interviewees explicitly reflected on the effects of climate change on gendered bodies. Some pointed out the physical impacts of phenomena such as resource conflict and migration for women. Shea drew on some of her experiences as an environmental lawyer in the United States working with women from Sudan to highlight links between droughts, physical violence, and migration. Along the same lines, Allison, a US-based environmental politics scholar, reflected on the ways that gender, migration, and exploitation intersect: "When you have populations, especially folks who are economic or political refugees, it's much easier, essentially, to get these people away from their support systems when their support systems are down, and to basically abuse them and exploit them when they don't have a lot of resources, when they really need the economic help or whatever. So, I think that migration is probably going to increase things like



human trafficking. It may increase conflict, which will also be really bad for women. Particularly because things like rape are used so often in conflict these days.” Allison draws a link between social vulnerability (i.e., lack of support networks) and physical vulnerability (i.e., risk of human trafficking or rape). This storyline says that women’s bodies are likely to be increasingly at risk for violence because of the stresses that accompany climate change and because they constitute an already marginalized group—a claim that finds support in academic literature (First, First, and Houston 2017; Fisher 2010).

Violence and death during natural disasters vividly illustrate the gendered physicality of how humans experience climate change (Buckingham 2020; Young 2002). Indeed, multiple interviewees specifically mentioned women’s vulnerability during disasters as part of their reflections on how gender might connect to experiences of climate change.<sup>7</sup> An example of this storyline comes from Ginnie, an environmental nonprofit worker from the UK: “I suppose in developing countries or in countries where women stay more at home, they’re going to be more impacted by climate change. . . . They’re the ones who are going to be most vulnerable because they might not have heard the news that those disasters are coming their way in the same way that men are more connected to their communities.” Like Ginnie, other interviewees frequently mentioned both flooding and droughts in particular as disasters that intersect with gendered patterns of labor and vulnerability. In the case of drought, many participants mentioned the fact that women are typically the ones expected to provide water for the household, a task that becomes more difficult in times of water scarcity. In the case of flooding, on the other hand, the expectation is that women will be more in harm’s way as waters rise because of gendered divisions of labor in homes and communities.

A large body of research has focused on gender and natural disasters as well (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Dankelman 2010; Demetriades and Esplen 2010; Detraz and Peksen 2017). In their widely cited article, Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plümper (2007) analyzed a sample of 141 countries between 1981 and 2002 and found that disasters adversely affect female life expectancy more than male life expectancy and that women have higher mortality rates in places where they are socioeconomically disadvantaged. This finding reinforces the idea that vulnerability is a condition made up of multiple forms

of marginalization, including class and gender. One interviewee, Deb, drew on her academic work on natural disasters in evaluating the complexities of vulnerability and disasters.

A lot of those that experience vulnerability, should you have a severe weather event, are about isolation. Now those who are isolated tend to be those less well embedded in communities, and if you have a single mother who is on housing benefit, is being housed in different places, moving around with lots of children—they are the most vulnerable because they are the least embedded and can't depend on family friends or others to respond. . . . In term of the effects . . . the simple explanation if you're a woman you have less money, less resources, less well-embedded, also the stigma of being poor, of admitting you need help, not willing to share problems with authority, it's income related and women still earn a lot less than men generally.

Deb's background in natural disaster research affords her unique knowledge of this form of climate change vulnerability. Her assessment of vulnerability contains several distinct storylines, including women-as-marginalized, women-as-caregivers, and women-as-poor. Her response, like Allison's mentioned above, also indicates that not all women experience vulnerability in the same ways. More specifically, women who tend to be at higher risk during disasters are the ones who are in a more precarious economic position, have children, and lack strong social support and community ties.

Natural disasters result in bodily harm during the actual event (i.e., drowning in a flood or dying during a tornado), but they also foster increased vulnerability in the social disruption following the event. For example, a few participants mentioned that women tend to suffer intimate partner violence (IPV) or other forms of physical harm during situations of social stress and that these increase as communities feel the effects of climate change. Marina, a US-based scholar, argued that disaster response tends to be male-dominated, hierarchical, and often blind to gendered challenges such as IPV—though this last point is changing. She felt that the characteristics of the response often reinforced women's vulnerability during and after disasters.

This gendered vulnerability to physical harm is illustrated by examples from a tsunami in South Asia in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005. Reports of IPV and other forms of abuse against

women increased considerably immediately after the tsunami and hurricane (David and Enarson 2012; Fisher 2010). In the case of the tsunami, women and young girls who were separated from their families were particularly vulnerable to abuse. In a 2020 study of four Indian states affected by the tsunami, Smitha Rao found that rates of IPV increased in the ten years following the disaster with “social disadvantage” strongly predicting IPV risk post-disaster. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, a study of displaced women found that nearly one in five reported experiencing some form of abuse or violence (Anastario, Larrance, and Lawry 2008). There were also reports of increased levels of IPV following US Hurricanes Harvey and Michael in 2018 (McDonald 2018; Zurawski 2018). Studies have also found connections between IPV and other climate-related factors such as declining water availability (Whittenbury 2012). It is important to note that these patterns occur both in the global North and global South. Participants also provided examples of how women’s marginalization facilitates unique forms of vulnerability in times of environmental change in multiple spaces. However, most of their reflections focused on women in developing countries, a point that will be discussed at length in later sections.

In sum, the women-as-vulnerable discourse is centered on the notion that various societies expect women to play particular roles in communities and in families. These gendered roles often include domestic labor and care work, which intersect with climate change impacts. All of these patterns combined put women at greater risk of climate change vulnerability. But what makes this story possible? If climate change exacerbates patterns of marginalization or exclusion, what are the social, economic, and political structures that make this so?

## **GENDER, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND EXISTING STRUCTURES**

That climate change exacerbates existing patterns of marginalization or discrimination was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. It is also a common storyline in media, scholarly, and policy treatments of climate change impacts.<sup>8</sup> Several interviewees mentioned a connection between gender and climate change during such transformative processes as the Scientific

Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Environmental Revolution—all dominated by men (Detraz 2017b; Plumwood 2002), which ushered in new patterns in the relationships between humans and ecosystems. This storyline was prevalent in response to my question of whether interviewees saw any connections between gender and the causes of climate change.<sup>9</sup> One repeated answer was that while it is inaccurate to claim that men “caused” climate change, they were the ones in positions to make decisions related to processes that contribute to climate change. Additionally, interviewees noted specific connections between masculinity and the economic, social, and political factors that have led to our current climate crisis.

Multiple participants focused on the male-dominated character of the Industrial Revolution as evidence that, at its most fundamental level, our current climate crisis has been driven by the decision-making of men. They argued that men dominate most of the high-carbon emitting industries, particularly the fossil fuel industry. Historically, they have made decisions about large-scale resource extraction and use, while it is marginalized communities that are now being disproportionately negatively impacted by the ramifications of those decisions. Several extended this storyline to reflections on the dominance of men in global capitalism more generally. Many were quick to point out that they do not necessarily think that women in positions of power would have made different decisions since they would have been responding to the same incentives as men. In this view, it is the nature of the position of power that facilitates the decisions to view the environment in utilitarian terms at the expense of sustainability. One interviewee, Glenda, an environmental lawyer in the UK, said,

I mean the system we're living in is basically a system that's been set up for men. I'm not saying that women don't facilitate it and run along with it. But it's mostly, you know, the Industrial Revolution and the way we do things . . . and the idea that property is a very sort of masculine concept and, and contract law and this idea that there's always ownership involved.

Likewise Darcy, a US-based academic, expressed this view by saying,

I'm drawn to thinking about the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the West, and global capitalism more broadly, and how it is that women are obviously

increasingly engulfed in becoming exploiters, especially in the West and First World nations. But I think that historically they mostly found themselves on the side of those who have been exploited and so, I still think of that as, you know, [a] Western capitalist, patriarchal narrative more than anything.

Put differently, both Glenda and Darcy claim that while women are active participants in current economic structures, there are deep connections between these structures and masculinity that shape our positions within them.

The Scientific Revolution came up in the interviews in a similar way: participants argued that male-driven turning points in our history have fundamentally shaped humanity's trajectory, and that followed a specific exploitative logic about the environment and our place within it. Kylie, an environmental scholar working in the United States, argued:

I think that it's probably rooted historically. Maybe back to the Scientific Revolution and how we "do" science in the West—and ideas about the material of the earth being insentient stuff that we can manipulate at will. . . . I mean, a lot, of course, can be said about Western science and how it developed from the Scientific Revolution. . . . And the "objective, modest observer who is unmoved by the consequences of scientific experiments" has shaped a lot of our technology since then and allowed us to create technology that externalizes negative consequences onto the surrounding environment.

Kylie thinks that the dominant scientific paradigm influences not only how science is conducted, but also how humans think about our obligations to nature and to each other. In her view, dominant approaches to science can contribute to environmental change because they see the environment as something open to manipulation. Environmental scholars have also pointed to how the Scientific Revolution continues to shape human-nature connections. Karen Litfin (2012, 420) explains that "after Descartes, Western science and philosophy generally understood the world as a machine, a view that has been increasingly globalized in recent decades." For instance, Francis Bacon famously claimed that "the world is made for man, not man for the world" (quoted in Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005, 38–39).

While the mentions of the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions may not be very surprising in the context of discussions of structures that exacerbate

inequality or marginalization, perhaps the presence of the Environmental Revolution on the list is unexpected. By the “Environmental Revolution,” I am referring to the spread of environmental policymaking and advocacy around the world that accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. While it is true that people have been calling attention to environmental issues for centuries,<sup>10</sup> over time societies began to see environmental issues as crucial social and political issues. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that public demand for safer and cleaner spaces, coupled with the proliferation of environmentally focused nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), resulted in states paying increased attention to the environment as a political issue.<sup>11</sup> Environmental NGOs have played a central role in advocating on behalf of the environment and those communities that experience environmental change. The first environmental NGOs emerged in the late nineteenth century and included the International Union of Forestry Research Organizations in 1891 and the International Friends of Nature in 1895 (Betsill 2014). There are now a huge number of environment-oriented organizations that interact with the policymaking process in states across the world. The Environmental Revolution facilitated their professionalization and expansion as environmental issues gained traction (Wapner 2012).

While the number of environmental organizations has increased over time, most of the well-known organizations with cross-national reach trace their origins to middle- and upper-class white men in the global North. Gender norms played a role in the framing of the movements, as well as members’ understanding of their place within them (Gottlieb 2005; Jones 2019; Nash 2001). In the late nineteenth century, when some mainstream environmental organizations emerged, concerns about masculinity were heightened as social and economic shifts associated with industrialization and urbanization resulted in new types of white-collar employment. These jobs were regarded as “soft” and incompatible with dominant standards of masculinity for the time (Mann 2011). Ecosystems provided realms within which to (re)connect with masculinity, as wealthy men of this era looked to wilderness adventures to foster “toughness” and “virility.” While the types of environmental organizations and their foci have proliferated considerably since then (Doherty and

Doyle 2006), many well-known organizations have struggled to fully break from their traditional past.

This theme was discussed by several interviewees who work in the environmental nonprofit sector and who called attention the challenge that their organizations have faced in diversifying both their composition and their focus. The latter was described as involving things like moving away from a narrow view of the environment and toward a greater embrace of environmental justice concerns. For instance, Paige reflected on gender issues in her environmental organization in London as well as larger questions of gender “in the movement.” She argued that

the climate change movement is notoriously un-diverse. There are a decent number of women who work in climate change, but lots of charities wouldn't allow a woman to get to the senior leadership levels. So, I think there's an issue around women working in climate change. . . . I think just like any workplace, any move ups in seniority level, women tend to fall out. So, it is dominated by white, middle-class men. And that is deeply unhelpful for diversifying participation, and also it's a self-perpetuating cycle.

Even though many people like Paige who work “in the movement” recognize differential marginalization and the need to diversify, the male-dominated nature of the Environmental Revolution continues to mold the possibilities of climate change nonprofit work today.<sup>12</sup> This storyline in particular surfaced in several of the environmental nonprofit workers' descriptions of their experiences in their organizations.

Each of the three major historical developments mentioned in this section are often discussed as moving humanity towards “progress” in terms of objective scientific work, economic growth, and environmental action, respectively. What these depictions fail to tell us, however, are the consequences of these moves across various communities. Each one has intimately affected human relationships with nature, and each one is closely connected with masculinity. Gendered assumptions about domination and exploitation mean that it is not just that decisions were made by men, but that these decisions were made within a mindset that frequently privileged particular

characteristics or processes. Examples include environmental exploitation or manipulation in the case of the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, and hierarchical decision-making and a narrow idea of “the environment” in the case of the Environmental Revolution. We must reflect on who benefits from “progress” and who does not. How does marginalization manifest, and how does it intersect with large-scale environmental processes such as climate change?

## CATEGORIES OF MARGINALIZATION

Social, cultural, political, economic, and physical factors influence who is most likely to be vulnerable to environmental change and how that vulnerability will manifest (Wisner et al. 2003). This section addresses some of these categories of marginalization as described by the interview participants. In most instances, they saw climate change impacts reinforcing or worsening existing patterns of inequality in societies. Those that are currently discriminated against, excluded, or susceptible to shocks in society will become more so in the face of climate change. Interviewees used storylines of race, class, age, disability, and place in order to describe these patterns of exclusion and marginalization.

### Race

Racial differences in exposure to environmental ills is a consistent theme in environmental scholarship (Bullard 2005; Bullard and Wright 2012). Literature has also focused on the links between race and climate change vulnerability specifically (Shepherd and KC 2015). A few participants from the nonprofit sector discussed the steps that their organizations have been taking in order to reflect on race, exclusion, and climate change. For instance, Brenda explained how these debates have manifested in her US-based environmental nonprofit:

We have worked very hard to center communities of color and populations that are going to be impacted first and worst by climate change and have done the least to cause the problem in the solutions. And by combining social justice and environmental justice along with the solutions to climate change, people who have been privileged and have had more than their fair share for a long time will necessarily get less. They will get what they should be getting, and that



feels like . . . something is being taken away from them. And that is very difficult for them to accept. That's not just men, but it's people of privilege in general. But my experience is white men . . . have a really hard time accepting that their perspective is not the only perspective that matters, and not being the only voice that's being listened to.

Brenda reflected on the concept of race both as it influences who is most likely to feel the impacts of climate change, but also in the ways that addressing the differential burden of environmental change will require those in dominant positions to reconsider their status and make changes to distributions of power. Her mention of attempts to “center communities of color” and other affected populations calls attention to the steps necessary to achieve change in this area. Rather than privileged communities continuing to dominate climate change spaces as experts, policymakers, and changemakers, other populations need to drive decision-making forward.

Interviewees often listed women as one among a number of marginalized groups who are less responsible for the decisions that have caused climate change, yet more heavily impacted by it. Communities of color are another group within this category. Annise, a US-based nonprofit worker, said, “I think about women specifically, and how women all over the world will be inequitably affected. Much as how we speak about how communities of color are inequitably affected by climate change.” Similarly, Shea drew on her experience as an environmental attorney as well as her work in the renewable energy industry in the United States:

I'm very aware of how those most adversely impacted by the lack of sound environmental policies, and climate change reduction policies, are not only women but people of color—especially Latino people in this country. I'm very intimately aware that in Chicago the most polluted area is certainly Black and Latino. . . . In Atlanta, waste plants are always in the areas with poor people, who tend to be disproportionately Black and Latino. But working in mainstream nonprofits, especially on environmental issues, there is an unwillingness to address environmental issues and climate change through a race and class lens. Despite the fact that the ones who are most hurting are Black and Latino.

Shea further argued that women of color in particular face challenges achieving environmental justice. Her concerns about race and class, and the

obstacles to fully engaging with these within “mainstream nonprofits” also connect with the previous discussion of the nature of the environmental movement.<sup>13</sup>

Kathryn, who works for a clean energy nonprofit in the United States, also brought up race:

I’ve been doing some thinking, for instance, about the floods in Louisiana a few weeks ago—and thinking about race and about gender. So, thinking about how would Black residents potentially be more impacted than white. I don’t have specific data on that but know . . . that . . . [there is] a combination of racial and discrimination issues that they face. You know, who has reason to trust the police. And who has family members with financial resources to support them. And, you know, a whole range of things. And everything that we know about housing and employment. And that may be similar, or parallel, or different—but related types of things to gender. So, . . . there are more single moms out there than there are single dads . . . and low-income families that are women-led. And that intersects with race, right? Because you’ve got this huge over-incarceration of Black men in our country. And so, impacts of poverty related to gender certainly affect people and how they respond to the impacts of climate change.

Kathryn’s response brings up specific ways that marginalized communities have to navigate obstacles and inequities within existing economic, social, and political structures. This means that members of these communities have to deal with the impacts of environmental change while simultaneously addressing these obstacles. She explicitly mentions interactions between members of Black communities and police and the prison system as important considerations when discussing natural disasters in the United States. In these examples, gender, race, and environmental injustice are all inextricably linked. It is impossible to understand how particular communities will cope with climate change impacts without first understanding how they deal with other stresses, such as dire economic conditions and strained support networks. Although there has been some research on these issues in fields such as critical race studies, it has largely been absent from environmental debates within political science, and more importantly, environmental policymaking (Dillon and Sze 2016; Pellow 2016). Kathryn’s comments underscore

the necessity of an intersectional approach to climate vulnerability. It is not enough to think about gender, or race, or class on their own; rather, we must attend to how these categories overlap and at times reinforce each other.

Of note is that nearly all of the discussions of race in the interviews came from women currently working in the United States. There are likely several reasons for this, including the legacy of the anti-environmental racism movement that began in the United States. The term “environmental racism” was coined in 1982 by Benjamin Chavis, head of the United Church of Christ’s Commission on Racial Justice, at a protest over the siting of a toxic landfill in a predominately Black, poor neighborhood in North Carolina. Chavis, a trained chemist, understood the lasting damage that a facility like the landfill could inflict on local residents. He defined “environmental racism” as “racial discrimination in the siting of toxic waste dumps and polluting industries, unequal enforcement of environmental laws, and the exclusion of people of color from environmental decision-making” (quoted in Schlosburg and Caruthers 2010, 13). This concept of environmental racism highlighted oppression, political disenfranchisement, and poor health. Research across several countries finds that race is one of the strongest variables for predicting where waste facilities or other polluting sites are located (Bullard and Wright 2012; Mitchell and Dorling 2003). Though concern about environmental racism was one of the earliest strands of the environmental justice debate, scholars and activists who use the concept today utilize a variety of perceptions about the nature of justice (Agyeman and Evans 2004). Hence, environmental justice is a concept that is central to understanding the numerous ways that the issues of environmental change, fairness, inequality, vulnerability, and marginalization are intertwined. At the same time, there is some criticism that gender has not been sufficiently incorporated into conceptualizations of environmental justice. Issues of race, class, and indigeneity have dominated most scholarly and policy discussions in this area, with gender and sexuality being frequently absent, although this is changing (Gaard 2011; Sze 2017).

### **Class**

Like the other categories of marginalization discussed throughout this chapter, class influences vulnerability in important ways. Poverty connects to marginalization and exclusion in society and influences how people experience

climate change (Hertel, Burke, and Lobell 2010; Leichenko 2014). Lack of economic resources undermines adaptation capacity and resilience to environmental change. Climate-related hazards affect economically marginalized communities both directly and indirectly. Climate change has repercussions for livelihoods, food availability and prices, and agricultural productivity. It can destroy homes that are built in environmentally precarious areas. These stresses worsen the marginalization that poor people already experience and can lead to chronic poverty for those in both rural and urban areas (Hardoy and Pandiella 2009; IPCC 2014a). While we might be tempted to think that this is a problem that is restricted to the global South, studies have found that this is the case in the aftermath of natural disasters in states within the global North as well. Junia Howell and James R. Elliott (2019) studied the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in the United States and concluded that wealth inequity actually increases as government disaster recovery programs are administered in an area, again reinforcing the notion that vulnerability is multifaceted and forms of marginalization are reinforcing.<sup>14</sup>

Many interviewees outlined a specific link between poverty, gender, and vulnerability and saw poverty as one of the factors that exacerbated women's condition of vulnerability. For instance, Selma, a nonprofit worker in Germany, raised the issue of women increasingly being responsible for household budgets. As climate change puts increasing pressure on food prices and other necessities, many women will struggle to cope. She noted that this might occur as men migrate from rural areas for work. Paige reflected on the same issue in the context of the UK, where she works in the nonprofit sector, noting that as flood events become more frequent and severe, wealthy people will be able to move away from affected areas while poor people will not have that option. For her, this will likely worsen existing gendered inequality in the UK since women are "getting poorer" due to the government's economic policies. This point about poverty influencing who can relocate and who cannot was echoed in other interviews as well.

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, I noted how Farhana drew on her environmental organization's experience with disaster recovery projects in Bangladesh to argue that poverty influences adaptation to disasters as well as whether or not poor and marginalized women have their voices heard. She

said, “I think the effects of climate change and the burden of poverty that comes as a result of climate change disasters is [*sic*] often more felt by women than perhaps men. That’s not to say that it’s exclusively felt by women, but we’ve found that in our disaster committees, for example, about 70 percent of those that are most affected are women.” In her view, women’s poverty also affects whether women are included in decision-making about climate change, as illiterate women will not typically be included in policy decisions.

Another storyline related to the issue of class concerns wealth, which most people strive for. This influences priorities and behavior that have helped usher in climate change and will need to be overcome in order to effectively address it. Some women argued that the desire for wealth is not just something to ensure one’s survival, but rather a flaw in humanity that must be overcome. Along these lines, Kate pointed out that there is a sense of entitlement in the upper-middle-class US neighborhood where she works for an environmental nonprofit. In her view, wealthy people feel that they are already doing enough by recycling or donating to environmental causes, something she says she finds “ridiculous.” For this storyline, wealthy people—and wealthy communities and wealthy states—are unwilling to confront their own position in processes that make others vulnerable.

### **Disability and Age**

Vulnerability based on disability or age were two additional marginalization storylines that came up in the interviews, albeit relatively infrequently. Both the storylines reflect on connections between environmental vulnerability and the body in specific ways. Deb, a UK-based academic working on natural disasters, brought up both in talking about the way that vulnerability has been conceptualized in a rather limited way by the UK government. She explained that a person is considered to be vulnerable if “they are dependent on medical equipment, so somebody in a wheelchair, oxygen mask. If someone has a disability or someone who is older than sixty-five.” While the “official” category of vulnerability has been oriented around the idea of health, Deb suggests that it is often much more about isolation or embeddedness—that is, whether or not people have access to networks that can provide help and support. This was echoed by Mary, who has worked

for the UK government on various environmental outreach programs. She argued that the way governments assess vulnerability as well as value (i.e., property value) in order to determine who in a community is eligible for specific forms of aid is very narrow. Both Deb and Mary had backgrounds in natural disasters work or research that allowed them to point out specific policies or recent events. Both suggested that because of current policy approaches to vulnerability, rural residents might be hardest hit by disasters such as floods and might be least able to adapt. At the same time, they are often also ineligible for certain types of government assistance such as financial compensation. This highlights the importance of rethinking dominant environmental policies through different lenses that recognize vulnerability as a multifaceted, socially conditioned phenomenon.

Disability also came up in interviews in discussions of people's movement, either in city planning contexts or in natural disasters. For example, Mary told the story of an elderly blind woman whose house flooded. Neighbors banded together to "protect" the woman, even though she seemed to be getting along just fine. Mary specifically noted that it was largely the male neighbors who took it upon themselves to look after the woman. She likened it to a "male bonding thing." This relates to the idea of the "hero complex" discussed more in chapter 7. Mary was struck with the way that the community members perceived disability differently than the blind woman herself and regarded her as someone in need of assistance.

Disability is an often-overlooked category of marginalization that connects to climate change. There has been scant academic work on disability in disaster or climate change research.<sup>15</sup> Nor has it been prominently featured in more general, global climate change policy documents. Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for instance, have devoted more attention to issues of class, gender, and place than disability. Occasional mentions of disability as one among a number of factors influencing vulnerability have little elaboration.<sup>16</sup>

The disability and vulnerability storyline focuses mainly on the perception or actual condition of those with disabilities being more vulnerable to natural disasters and the like. The age and vulnerability storyline features some of the same themes. Moreover, both children and older people are

particularly susceptible to the impacts of environmental change (Watts et al. 2018). In the case of children, studies indicate that they bear a disproportionate burden of disease stemming from climate change impacts (Sheffield and Landrigan 2011). They also face unique challenges during events such as natural disasters, including restricted movement, less physical strength, and limited access to early-warning systems.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, they are typically excluded from decision-making about their future (Thew 2018). The distinctive nature of youth vulnerability to climate change impacts was the entrance point for thinking about gender and climate change connections for Mary, a UK-based researcher. She expressed frustration that academics seem to focus on gender or other categories when thinking about vulnerability, while often ignoring youth. Despite this perception of a lack of attention to youth, the issue of children's health and climate change did come up in a number of interviews.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, advanced age is often recognized as making individuals more susceptible to climate change impacts. This was specifically mentioned in a few interviews in the context of fuel poverty in the UK. While they were not necessarily directly tying the issue to climate change, interviewees reflected on how fuel poverty reflects gendered patterns of experiencing environmental issues in general. According to a research briefing for the UK Parliament, fuel poverty is measured in several different ways, but it generally refers to households that have to spend a large amount of their income on keeping their residence at a reasonable temperature. This is particularly a concern in Scotland, where in 2017 an estimated 24.9 percent of households were fuel poor (Sutherland et al. 2018). Yvette, who works for an energy nonprofit in Scotland, explained the connections between gender, age, and fuel poverty by noting that “you think of the elderly, you know women live longer, there tends to be an image of the old ladies in their freezing Highland cottages. And if it's the old and the young that are most vulnerable, and mothers are more likely to be home with kids as well.” Here she indicates multiple dimensions of vulnerability, including age, gender, and motherhood status. This complex view of the sources and experiences of vulnerability was common among the interviews.

## Place

The most frequently used storyline linking marginalization and vulnerability to climate change is place. Out of seventy-six interviewees, thirty-one mentioned at least once that women in “poor countries” or “developing countries” are be on the front lines of climate change effects. This storyline was sometimes linked to lack of education opportunities, lack of access to family planning, or exclusion from climate change decision-making. Talia, an environmental scientist working in the nonprofit sector in Germany, explained the situation in these terms:

I mean, we're in Europe, we don't really realize that climate change is going on. We complain about the weather all day long, but this is not what climate change is about. And those who actually have to suffer from it are the people mainly living in the global South. And there, women are more likely to be responsible [for] taking care of the family and not having an office job or whatever. But it's more the down-to-earth realization that, “Ok if there's a drought coming up, I don't know what to do.” Or “My cattle are dying and, I can't grow my crops.” And essentially that means that food has to come from another source, but where from? You know? And these are all problems I think mostly women have to try and deal with because I think it's the poorest of the poor who suffer most.

Painting a specific picture of women in the global South, Talia depicted them as likely to live in rural areas, assume caregiving roles, and have direct connections to resource use. Additionally, this passage contains a few important themes that were brought up by multiple interviewees: (1) women's poverty in the global South, (2) gendered divisions of labor, and (3) differences between the global North and global South.

The global South in general was often conceptualized by the participants as lacking resources necessary for adaptation to climate change. States in the global South were frequently discussed as “developing” or “poorer.” This is evidence that the previous discussion of class relates to economic power dynamics across the international system as well as domestically. At the same time, interviewees seemed to identify women in general as more likely to experience poverty, and women in the global South as struggling with this condition more than women in the global North. Ingrid, an environmental nonprofit worker in Germany, pointed to these connections:



I think women are more affected by climate change and so they experience it stronger. I think it also has to do with education level, so in some developing countries, girls don't have the same chances to attend school as boys. They don't get to work in the same positions later on, and then they are typically the poorer people.

Here she links gendered access to education and employment with gendered patterns of poverty. In her view, this poverty results in women often having less adaptive capacity to address climate change. In general, most of the interviewees discussed how climate change effects would be felt by rural communities,<sup>19</sup> but this was particularly true when they brought up the global South. While they rarely said "rural women," they talked about tasks such as directly coping with drought or engaging in subsistence farming, which are rarely associated with urban life. There are important implications of this trope of the vulnerable southern woman which will be taken up in the following section.

As discussed previously, climate change impacts on natural resource availability and quality are frequently associated with women's vulnerability. In some cases, interviewees' perspectives were shaped by first-hand experience of fieldwork in other countries or by the stories of women whom they met in the course of their work in the global South.<sup>20</sup> Eva, a nonprofit worker based in Germany, reflected on her encounter with a woman from Malawi who took part in one of her organization's summer programs. She specifically focused on women's role in collecting fuelwood and how this becomes more difficult with climate change. Likewise, as noted above, Farhana acknowledged that her responses to my questions would draw on her work in Bangladesh with a UK-based nonprofit and on knowledge drawn from her Bangladeshi family. She mentioned women's tasks both in their day-to-day lives and during natural disasters as intersecting with experiences of climate change. Finally, a few interviewees noted the gendered divisions of labor they were familiar with in countries they spent time in doing fieldwork for academic research projects.

There was a much greater tendency for participants to talk about women outside of the global North than within it. Since all of the interviewees were currently working and living in a northern state, this is quite noteworthy. In

fact, some said that they struggled to see how gender and climate change would be an issue for women in the global North. Marie noticed this tendency:

It's interesting, though, how I tend to think of the global South first, then something that is close to me, but I think in our everyday life in the US and Europe, I'm not sure that the effects would be felt as strongly. I mean that there would be a gender difference on the effects of climate change because for us, it's more about, for instance, heat in the cities. I don't think that . . . heat would have different effects or would touch more women or men.

For Marie, climate vulnerability does not touch people in the global North as directly and not in ways that are as noticeably gendered as in the global South. However, there were some instances of participants first mentioning that women in the global South are the most vulnerable, then reflecting on their own environment or community. In the context of the UK, they mentioned flooding, rural areas and farmers struggling with weather unpredictability, and the potential for problems with sea level rise in low lying areas. In the context of the United States, they focused mostly on poor air quality or other forms of pollution in low-income neighborhoods and on different patterns of exposure to natural disasters. A few interviewees also mentioned that while those in the global North are not currently feeling the effects of climate change on a grand scale, they are next in line to feel what is already being felt in other places.

In sum, participants identified multiple categories of marginalization in addition to gender that intersect with climate change. Race, class, age, disability, and place were the most prominent categories. Interviewees typically reflected on mechanisms through which gender interacts with some of these other categories in order to make climate change experiences worse for those communities. The archetype of vulnerability in the global South is the poor resource user with family responsibilities. In the global North, it is the single mother. Heidi, a nonprofit worker in the United States, argued that “even in developed countries people who are the poorest and have the tightest resources, they are going to be the hardest hit. In this country, it would be single mothers that you often hear about.” In both of these examples, the

notion of marginalization has to do with the intersection of gender and class and involves gendered obligations of care work.

Because I have laid out the discussion of these forms of marginalization in discrete sections, it might appear as though the interviewees failed to make connections across them. This is not the case. For instance, Hildi, a nonprofit worker based in the UK, argued that it is essential to think broadly about the idea of marginalization and vulnerability:

We talk a lot about who has to bear the brunt of climate change and within that again vulnerable groups are the ones that are hardest hit. And so there gender again I think plays part. But . . . I think it's still a wider social justice issue. So, while I would probably include certain groups of women, or minority groups such as transgender communities, in the more vulnerable sections, I think there's also a wider kind of global South/global North divide.

Her response identifies how people may find themselves in multiple marginalized groups simultaneously, as well as how global distribution of power might influence climate change vulnerability.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN-AS-VULNERABLE DISCOURSE**

An important question that guides my reflections on the implications of the women and climate change discourses is what is climate change? Women and climate change discourses shape understandings of women, but they also each serve as a representation or social understanding of climate change. According to Sherilyn MacGregor (2010, 229), “Climate change may be ‘real’ and have material manifestations, but it is also being shaped by social and cultural norms and discourses.” Across the four women and climate change discourses, climate change is depicted as a global phenomenon that damages—it hurts bodies, harms livelihoods, limits futures. It is portrayed as an empirical global problem that needs to be understood and acted upon; climate change, like pandemics or terrorism, is a looming and consuming facet of humanity’s present and future existence. It is represented as a space

of work or action—people work “in climate change” as scholars and activists. This designation tells people which type of organization one works for or meetings one goes to or the type of research one does. Asking what is climate change permits us to probe climate change as a fluid and socially conditioned concept (Pettenger 2007; Weart 2011). The women-as-vulnerable discourse depicts climate change as an embodied phenomenon that is the product of human choices. It brings droughts and floods, makes water and food provision more difficult, and exacerbates burdens for those tasked with providing care for families. Interviewees regarded climate change as an existing source of hardship for those who are already marginalized, and something that will only intensify inequality and injustice in the future if humanity continues down our current path.

The plight of marginalized groups featured heavily in this understanding of climate change, with women at the front of the list. In the foundational book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Cynthia Enloe (1990) asked what on the surface might appear to be a relatively straightforward question: “Where are the women” in international politics? Several decades later, it remains important to ask, “Where are the women” in the politics of climate change? Thus, we must consider both the spaces in which women are present and those from which they are absent. And we must think through their roles and actions as well as to question why these and not others? “Where are the women?” moves us to think critically about who the women are in the various discourse? Are they the ones who gender norms tell us to expect? What are the different categories of women’s experiences that get depicted across the discourses? Participants in this study used the discourses not only to refer to themselves or other specific women but also to represent an imagined version of women.

So, where are the women in the women-as-vulnerable discourse? Women are in homes preparing food and tending to children and relatives, in fields and forests collecting resources, or in shelters dealing with the aftermath of disasters. They are absent from the boardrooms and policy tables where key decisions about fossil fuel and land use are made. They are likewise absent from the science labs or environmental organizations that help shape perceptions of “nature” or “environment” and humanity’s relationships to these.

Interviewees I seemed highly aware of the links between marginalization and vulnerability. They reflected on ways that women tend to feel climate change “first and worst” because of their position in their societies. They referred to the ways that existing social, economic, and political structures limit women’s agency and access to power or how poverty or racial discrimination inhibit adaptation capacity. Overall, women were not depicted simply as a group of victims, but rather as people struggling to cope with climate change. In reflecting on poverty in particular, interviewees tended to refer to the kinds of jobs that women tend to have (i.e., underpaid) or the fact that other obligations influence women’s labor choices or options (i.e., caregiving roles).

Participants typically contextualized why certain women might be poor when others are not by considering their roles as resource users or single mothers. When considering who are the women, however, popular depictions of women in climate change discussions tend to paint them as rural, poor, excluded, and from the global South. Scholars and policymakers often discuss different roles or positions for women based on whether they are in the global North or global South (Arora-Jonsson 2011). Images used in government or intergovernmental organization reports on gender and climate change often feature women working in a field in a nameless African country or women in saris walking through floods. This seems to be the image that many interviewees had when I first asked them what comes to mind when they hear the phrase “gender and climate change”: a rural, poor woman in the global South. These dominant portrayals of women jumped to mind, and it was only after asking some follow up questions that many offered specific reasons why women might be more vulnerable to climate change. It is also important to note that participants referred not to themselves using these storylines, but rather to women from “developing” or “poorer” states. While it is true that some interviewees were directly drawing on either fieldwork or projects they had done with specific rural communities as part of their job to answer my questions, the majority who used a women-as-vulnerable discourse were referring to a general idea of women from the global South.”<sup>21</sup> According to scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003a), these kinds of depictions are both problematic and common. Representations

of women outside of the global North typically lack context and assume a homogeneous, downtrodden other. This speaks to ways in which power flows through climate change spaces, a theme that will be discussed further in chapter 6.

The kinds of climate change spaces participants brought up, such as climate change negotiations, climate change panels at academic conferences, or government buildings where climate policy is debated, are located in the global North. There, dominant voices tend to be those of white men. They also have an oversized role in shaping discourses focused on women's victimhood, and these discourses become deeply embedded in shared understanding of climate change. People in the global South, particularly women along with other marginalized groups, are rarely in a position to shape discourses about experiences in the global North. But this is the fundamental thing about discourses—they offer shared understanding of phenomena such as environmental change, whether this understanding would be recognizable to the people cast within them. In this way, climate change debate and action typify unequal distributions of power around the world. This is in no way unique to climate change, but rather illustrates the continuity of patterns of domination in global political spaces and even who determines how scholars, policymakers, and the public understand the issues within them.

Intersectional analysis recognizes the need to reveal how varying forms of marginalization overlap and influence discrimination and vulnerability (Crenshaw 1994). The women-as-vulnerable discourse has enormous potential to overlook intersectionality. This would discount the ways that race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and other factors interact with gender to shape the ways individuals go through the world. While there were some responses that lacked intersectional analysis, interviewees often avoided this tendency by reflecting on how gender and race or class build on each other to influence whether and how communities might be hard hit by climate change. It is interesting to note that participants located in different spaces focused on different aspects of intersectionality. While race was an issue touched on by some interviewees in the US context, class was a theme evoked by those working in the UK. Additionally, discussions of indigenous communities rarely came up, even though this is a major component of environmental

justice conversations at the global level and the marginalized status of indigenous communities has significant bearing on patterns of vulnerability (Shearer 2012).

I originally decided to write this book because I wanted to understand how women see connections between gender and climate change. More specifically, I wondered whether women would use the vulnerability frames that I came across so often in news stories, policy documents, and even academic work. What I found was that participants did evoke the idea of vulnerability quite often, but that their understanding of vulnerability was more complex than I originally anticipated. In terms of frequency, the women-as-vulnerable discourse was heavily used across the interviews as well as the surveys that I conducted as a check on the interview responses. It was used 122 times across the interviews, and over half of the survey responses (eleven out of twenty) mentioned that women will be disproportionately burdened by climate change in their initial reaction to the phrase “gender and climate change,” meaning that this is the first thing they thought of, before being potentially led elsewhere by any of my subsequent questions. In both the interviews and surveys, participants rarely couched women’s positions in terms of victimhood (only four interviewees specifically used the term to refer to women feeling the impacts of climate change), but rather described the structures and conditions that make women more likely to be significantly impacted by climate change. In some cases, participants were using the women-as-vulnerable discourse to describe a hypothetical situation. In other instances, they drew on their research or projects they were involved in with their jobs. For instance, Marina and Deb referred to their research on natural disasters to explain how communities might experience environmental change.

Participants in this study were not unique to using a vulnerability discourse to describe women, particularly when reflecting on the consequences or experiences of climate change. In fact, high-profile global climate change texts also commonly use these kinds of discourses. Several IPCC reports along with the text of the Paris Agreement, for instance, stress women’s vulnerability whenever gender is mentioned (IPCC 2014b, 2014c; UNFCCC 2015).<sup>22</sup> All of these texts frame women as facing social, economic, or political barriers in society, which shape their experience of environmental change

and their ability to address it. The texts express a need for states to strive for gender equity in working toward climate change mitigation and adaptation, and these calls tend to focus explicitly on women's current exclusion or marginalization. They acknowledge women as either agents or potential agents, specifically in climate change adaptation. Yet, this agency is often depicted as being blocked by either direct or indirect vulnerability. One interesting aspect of these depictions is that although there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence about gendered climate change vulnerability, the international community lacks reliable gender-differentiated data on climate change experiences.<sup>23</sup> This was addressed in 2019 at the fourth session of the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi with a resolution on gender equality in environmental governance that included a commitment to collect sex disaggregated data, along with data disaggregated by age and disability.<sup>24</sup> This kind of information is crucial for recognizing the specific ways that gender intersects with climate vulnerability. This recognition is the first step in addressing it effectively and justly.

So, does it really matter if we use vulnerability discourses to understand women and climate change? Discourses shape our very understanding of climate change as well as influencing policy debates in meaningful ways (Detraz 2017a; Stern 2006). Each of the four discourses discussed in this book offer both opportunities and obstacles to effective and just climate change approaches. On one hand, women in communities around the world *are* often among those who feel the impacts of climate change particularly acutely. Marginalization in the forms of less access to political and household decision-making, fewer adaptation resources, high potential for poverty, and gendered divisions of labor can contribute to women being on the front lines of experiencing the negatives of climate change (Alston 2011; Arora-Jonsson 2011; Dankelman 2010; Paavola 2006; Panitchpakdi 2008). Additionally, the stresses of climate change can exacerbate gender inequality in society. Recent empirical work points to a strong relationship between climate change impacts such as disasters and temperature rise and declines in women's economic and social rights. This is particularly the case in countries in the global South that rely heavily on agriculture in their economy (Eastin



2018). As climate change worsens and exacts greater burdens on societies, patterns of marginalization are likely to get worse.

Using a women-as-vulnerable discourse can therefore potentially highlight these gendered trends in vulnerability. As discussed throughout this chapter, vulnerability rarely results from one thing. Rather, it is the consequence of multiple social, economic, and political processes. Women and men tend to be differently placed in economic, political, and social processes in every country. For instance, women are underrepresented in politics in states around the globe. Women still tend to be overrepresented in low-wage or no-wage labor. Women tend to be underrepresented in many institutions that play large roles in processes of socialization, such as, entertainment or religion (Benería 2003; UNDP 2015). While it is true that the experiences of women in all societies differ, it is also the case that women frequently find barriers to accessing power in multiple spheres when compared to men in similar situations. Societal expectations about the appropriate or acceptable roles and responsibilities of men and women shape experiences (Detraz 2017b). The fact that women tend to face certain kinds of marginalization and discrimination in all societies means that climate change vulnerability is gendered. Justina Demetriades and Emily Esplen (2010, 133) stress that “where women and girls have less access to and control over resources (material, financial, and human), and have fewer capabilities than men, these impediments undermine their capacity to adapt to existing and predicted impacts of climate change, and to contribute important knowledge and insights to adaptation and mitigation decision-making processes.” Large societal patterns of gendered marginalization and discrimination result in many women experiencing climate change vulnerability in ways that differ from men in the same social and economic position.

On the other hand, if women are simplistically portrayed in climate change debates primarily as vulnerable victims, then there is a danger that they become viewed as a population that needs saving rather than a diverse set of people who can potentially play roles in their own future. Feminist environmental scholars frequently express concern about the use of essentialized ideas of women as a vulnerable category of actors who lack agency

(Arora-Jonsson 2011; Cuomo 2011; Denton 2002; MacGregor 2009). Seema Arora-Jonsson (2011) argues that women are often simplistically portrayed as either vulnerable or virtuous in discussions about climate change. Portrayals of virtuousness are tied to the assumption that women are more environmentally conscious, especially in the global North. Depictions of vulnerability are typically linked to the poverty of women in the global South, along with their experiences of environmental threats like natural disasters. Arora-Jonsson claims that either of these portrayals can result in policymaking that raises women's responsibilities without corresponding rewards. Either women become environmentally friendly warriors who should take the lead in "fixing" the problem, or women become problems for other actors to help. Either way, there is limited space in current discussions for considering where women's potential environmental awareness, poverty, or vulnerability to disaster comes from. For instance, most climate change policy documents mention systemic discrimination and marginalization, but these appear as a giant barricade that people are politely trying to find ways around. There is rarely sustained engagement with questions of how to reduce the central forms of inequality that make some people more likely to suffer climate impacts than others. Climate change vulnerability is tied to the same social, political, and economic processes that make some groups of people more likely to be exposed to unhealthy environments (Bullard 2005),<sup>25</sup> more likely to die at the hands of their partners or family members during and after natural disasters (True 2012),<sup>26</sup> or more likely to be excluded from environmental decision-making (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003).<sup>27</sup> These examples all speak to the centrality of marginalization within the concept of vulnerability.

Another concern with vulnerability discourses is that they sometimes serve to reproduce larger patterns of marginalization within society (Thomas and Warner 2019). States and intergovernmental organizations often use conceptualizations and measures of vulnerability to determine adaptation policies. Some scholarship has documented ways that these adaptation processes can actually reinforce existing forms of vulnerability or reproduce them in other communities (Atteridge and Remling 2018; Barnett and O'Neill 2010; Warner and Kuzdas 2016).<sup>28</sup> The interviews with Deb and

Mary in which they critiqued the UK's conceptualization of vulnerability in the aftermath of disasters speaks to this trend of vulnerability storylines having an uncomfortable fit with policymaking. At best, policies leave vulnerable people out of adaptation initiatives; at worst, they contribute to making vulnerable people even more so. Likewise, Kimberley Thomas and Benjamin Warner (2019, 101928) highlight instances in which “powerful stakeholders use climate change to justify extensive coercion, and, in the most extreme cases, their adaptation efforts target social rather than environmental threats.” They call this the “weaponization of vulnerability” and link it to climate security discourses. While most climate adaptation policies aim to limit or eliminate exposure to climate change effects and enhance capacity, some “novel forms of ‘adaptation’ identify people and social hazards (e.g., social disorder, violence, crime) as the principal dangers emanating from climate change” (Thomas and Warner 2019, 101928). This trend is particularly worrying considering that women’s fertility is already closely linked to climate change by multiple states, IGOs, and NGOs (Sasser 2018). The southern resource user with care obligations and the northern single mother were two of the persistent images of vulnerability across the interviews. If a women-as-vulnerable discourse is automatically linked to a women-as-mothers storyline (discussed in the next chapter), then women’s bodies can be at risk from the weaponization of vulnerability that has already occurred in policymaking around the world (Detraz 2021; Thomas and Warner 2019).

While I would argue that there are important negative implications to women in the global North frequently using the women-as-vulnerable discourse specifically to describe women in the global South, I think a few factors contribute to this portrayal. First, the majority of the women with whom I spoke did not have a strong background in feminist environmental work, gender studies, or any related field. For many of them, our discussion was one of the first times they had ever thought about gender-climate change connections. Given that most participants were giving spontaneous responses to my questions, they were likely drawing from the victimhood images that most of us are exposed to in the global North. When they

reflected on these links, they used many of the vulnerability images and storylines already at hand (or in mind).

It also appears to me that some of what is happening with the vulnerability discourses, and a reason why so many interviewees talk about women in the global South, is that they are reflecting on vulnerability as a spectrum. This is why even as some of them talk about what climate vulnerability looks like in their own context, they still recognize that vulnerability looks different in different places. Some participants even acknowledged this. They reflected on the fact that their first inclination was to mention women in the global South and wonder why that might be. This is why pushing back against simplistic vulnerability discourses is so essential. Alternative discourses that consider women's position and contribution to addressing climate change and recognize the complex ways that gender connects to environmental change, policymaking, societal shifts, economic processes, and everything else that goes along with the super-wicked problem that is climate change are needed. It is essential to understand the wide range of roles women currently play and will play in the future and simultaneously to consider both the vulnerability that communities face and women's agency and expertise. The following chapters provide some alternatives to the women-as-vulnerable discourse, sometimes defiant and sometimes complementary.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12118.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12118.001.0001)

# Women and Climate Change

## Examining Discourses from the Global North

By: Nicole Detraz

### Citation:

*Women and Climate Change: Examining Discourses from the Global North*

By: Nicole Detraz

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/12118.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12118.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262372664

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Adobe Garamond and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk by Jen Jackowitz.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Detraz, Nicole, author.

Title: Women and climate change : examining discourses from the global North / Nicole Detraz.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022022481 (print) | LCCN 2022022482 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262542074 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262362115 (epub) | ISBN 9780262372664 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Women and the environment—Developed countries. | Climatic changes—Social aspects—Developed countries.

Classification: LCC GE195.9 .W478 2023 (print) | LCC GE195.9 (ebook) | DDC 304.2/8082—dc23/eng20221004

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022481>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022482>