

Fighting the Climate Crisis = Fighting for Global Justice, Gender Equality and for Radical Economic Transformation

Summary

While the poor and disadvantaged are the ones who most suffer from the consequences of the climate crisis and are also more vulnerable, this effect is as well highly gendered. A climate justice perspective permits to highlight the interrelations between the climate crisis and issues of gender, class and race allowing a critique of capitalist exploitation that lies underneath all of this. That is why only greening our economy will not tackle these questions. The fight for climate justice and against ecological destruction therefore must be feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist.

1. What is (for me) a feminist perspective?

Feminism is constituted by a wide range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements across the globe that share the common goal to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. At the same time, feminist movements fight against gender stereotypes, deconstructing roles and images that are attributed to the biological sex of men and women that most often go along with giving less power to women and more access, privileges and possibilities to men. In sum, a feminist perspective tries to recognize, analyze, criticize and change the power relations that are established on the base of sex and gender.

The first feminist movements like the suffragettes in the early 20th century were mainly dominated by white middle-class women who fought for equal rights in the political and the public sphere. Then, starting in the 1960ies, much debate was going on as well over the inequalities in the private sphere, and until today much effort also goes into the protection of female bodies and their right to decide over their own bodies. The so-called third wave feminism starting in the 1980ies brought about much changes within feminist movements. Criticized mostly by black feminist activists for not including their perspectives as underprivileged and racialized women, feminist movement nowadays include widely an intersectional perspective into their work, including perspectives on race, class, age, ableism, and more form of discrimination into their work.

This made feminism not only more “complicated”, but also made their social analysis more fruitful and created growing links with other social movements. Especially the ecological movements were and are open to feminist perspectives and by this enrich the struggle against the climate crisis and ecological destruction in a capitalist world. This is my starting point, making clear that only an intersectional feminist perspective gives us the chance to see the strong links between oppression of the female and the exploitation of nature.

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2. What are parallels between female and nature exploitation?

One might assume that feminist and ecologist struggles are two different struggles and that the right to abortion or the struggle against domestic violence do not have much to do with ecological destruction, planetary heating and the burning of fossil fuels. However, I would like to argue here, along with ecofeminist theory and scholars of feminist political economy, that both are two sides of the same coin here. The bridge to understand the links between the manifold forms of oppression, destruction and exploitation for women as well as for our natural environment lies in the analysis of neoliberal and capitalist economy.

Neoliberal capitalist productivity is based on two key aspects: The assumption that endless economic growth is necessary and possible and the requirement of free and/or cheap labor force. In its core, both feminist and ecological movements fight against these notions, because neither are natural resources infinite on a limited planet nor is the reproductive work that is mostly carried out by women for free.

To put it in other words: A central key to understand the links between environmental destruction and female exploitation is to look at the way in which both serve in our economic system as supposedly infinite and free resources for production and the way in which both are exploited and by this serve as the basis for capitalist production and destruction. On the one hand, patriarchy functions as the ideological framework for the constant exploitation of women, on the other hand, growing production and consumption rates as well as an anthropocentric world-view justify the exploitation of natural resources; both are only made possible and backed up by the ideology of the capitalist system that seeks profits. Furthermore, patriarchal values and systems support the exploitation of the Earth's resources and people. This is for me one of the key elements why ecological and feminist struggles have so much in common and why we should accordingly analyze them as two fights for the same cause.

3. What does a feminist perspective on the climate crisis mean?

I would like to make my claims now more specific by looking at the current climate crisis. What has the climate crisis to do with female oppression and what reveals a feminist perspective on the climate crisis?

The first and maybe a bit polemic answer would be: The climate crisis is made by men. Not only is the heating of our planet and the ecological destruction an outcome of capitalist hunger for growth, profits and resources, it is also a result of male-driven economies. It is mostly men who sit in power positions in the economy. To give you just a short, but revealing example: The biggest fossil fuel companies in the world who contribute the largest part to the emission of greenhouse gases are by 100% led by men.

The same is true for political decision-making: Men still constitute the majority of decision makers and still 100 years after introduction voting rights for women, they own until today

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few power positions. This is not only true for nation states, but is also visible in international negotiations like the UNFCCC and the COP delegations. So women have far less access to climate-relevant policy-making and therefore, their perspective is also not included well enough in climate policies. Priorities and mitigation strategies might look differently otherwise. This is not to say that women in a capitalist and patriarchal system are per se better people and we don't know how our economy would look like if more women were involved in political and economic decision-making. But I do think it is worth noting, that the current crisis is mostly provoked by male decision-makers in power positions.

This goes along with very gendered behavioural patterns when it comes to ecological destructive behaviour. In a comparative study on energy use in Germany, Sweden, Norway and Greece, researcher found a strikingly higher use of energy by men than by women. This of course can be well explained by the fewer economic possibilities that women have and therefore is always a matter of class as well. However, a part of the explanation lies in the fact that women all over the world show higher concern for environmental issues and by consequence adapt their daily choices more often to environmentally friendly products and ways of living. Again, this is not to say that we should romanticize or construct an ideal of women who are "by their nature" more inclined to take care of the environment. But it might be interesting to look at how women are differently raised in order to develop a higher sense for nature and the environment. Because in every major study, it is visible that women express a higher concern for the risks of the heating of the planet as well.

However, the most important link between the climate crisis and female oppression lies in the effects of global heating. The disastrous effects of climate crisis are manifold: The rise of the sea-level, droughts and floods, natural disasters, scarcity of water and extinction of many species. You might think that these effects will be equally disastrous for everyone. But we know already that this is not the case. It is everywhere the most vulnerable who will suffer most from climate change. Just to give you one of my favourite examples: The sea-level will rise equally for Bangladesh and for the Netherlands. However, while the Netherlands have the financial and political stability to build dams and alternative housing for their nationals, people in Bangladesh will simply drown (and my guess is: Nobody will care much about it). That is the true reality we have to face in a hierarchical and unfair global world.

Now, the same is true when it comes to social categories like gender. Women are 14 times more likely to die during a climate disaster and already today 80% of climate refugees are women. Plus, and maybe most important, women represent the majority of small-holder farmers in the world and by this are economically highly dependent on the access to fertile land. Very often in regions, where people in general have less access and possibilities to adapt to changes caused by environmental destruction. Farming in the upcoming climate chaos will be more and more less reliable and pushes these women even further to the

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margins of society. Coupled with their small access to power, rights and money, climate change puts women, especially in the Global South, at the frontline of climate chaos.

In short: The climate crisis is not only a crisis made by men, the dire consequences are even more devastating on the most vulnerable in our societies, aggravating injustices based on class, race and gender. That is why I always argue along with the climate justice movement: The climate crisis is not an ecological problem, in its core it's the biggest social question of mankind, especially aggravating injustices of class, race and gender.

4. False Solutions: Green New Deal & Nationalist Ecologists of the Far-Right

I would now like to draw the attention to two paths of solution which will be in my view misleading and destructive if we consider that the climate crisis is in its essence a social crisis and if we apply the feminist perspective on the causes and consequences of the global heating.

First of all, much debate is going on about "greening the economy" or "Green New Deals". These pathways focus on massive public investment in order to lessen the carbon footprint of our economy and society. Fossil fuels shall be replaced by renewable energies, industries shall green their production chains and people shall change towards environmentally friendly behavior. "Green New Deals" even promise to boost economies offering new investment and job opportunities. Much concern is expressed on environmental destruction while at the same time no attention whatsoever is paid to the social stratification of societies nationally and globally. These strategies are not only visible in the energy sector, but also in the transport sector or in agriculture. Recent and most known examples are the raise of the gas tax in France by President Macron which provoked a major social up rise by the "Gilets Jaunes". Another one would be the run on biofuels which lead to deforestation and land grabbing in the Global South. Other examples would be the high hopes on electric vehicles which are ecologically questionable as long as we produce energy from fossil fuels and which only solve a small part of our current transport system. "Green New Deals" look for quick solutions without developing a view on wider consequences and causes.

However, given that the cause of the climate crisis is the capitalist and neoliberal economy with its endless thirst for profits, resources and poorly paid labour, these strategies will not tackle the root cause for environmental destruction or climate crisis and are bound to fail. No economic growth is independent from the (over-)use of resources and will always aggravate the unequal distribution of profits and wealth. Let us not fall into the trap to believe that we only need to green our economy, disregarding the social links and interrelations of these problems and by this ignoring the deeply inherent social injustices coming along with climate crisis. That is why I would go as far as to say that putting our efforts on "Green New Deals" might even worsen the current crises that we face.

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This leads to me to another warning. A few days ago, I came across a very remarkable article that talked about the ecological positions of the far-right. Today, the rise of the far-right is one of our biggest challenges that we face as a left and we already have fascist parties in power and soon more might follow. That is why I want to talk about them as well when it comes to the climate crisis. For now, most of the parties and movements of the far-right are characterized by climate change deniers who strongly argue against the fact of global heating. Now, we might think, that we should put a lot of effort to criticize the far-right for their positions on ecology and climate (as well as of course for their racist, patriarchal and inhumane notions). We do have to fear that a far-right in power positions will do nothing to prevent and stop global heating and that this will aggravate the problem.

However, another problem could be that the far-right would accept climate change as a real threat. Why would that be dangerous? Imagine, the far-right wants to tackle climate change but combines it with their nationalist, fascist, racist and misogynous world views. We would have to fear climate policies, that even more disadvantage the most vulnerable. We would have to fear ultra-nationalist and egoistic green "solutions" that only favour and protect the ones already in power and with privilege. This idea gave me goose bumps when I thought about it a bit and that is why I wanted to share this with you. It makes it even more understandable why we need feminist and anti-racist and anti-capitalist solutions to the climate crisis.

5. Conclusion: We need an intersectional perspective on the climate crisis

Once integrated and understood, I believe that an intersectional perspective on political problems serves as an eye-opener for different, but interrelated social factors and power structures. We realize that if we only tackle a part of a problem, the rest will remain the same or even worsen and by this not serve as a solution at all. When it comes to the climate crisis, we need to see as well the democratic and social deficits that come along with it for many people who are suffering most from the consequences of the climate crisis. That is why the climate justice movements claims: "System change, not climate change!"

In its essence, the fight against climate destruction must be an anti-capitalist one, or more precisely put, a feminist and eco-socialist struggle. So yes, we are talking about major and a radical economic transformation. Because this system with all its economic imbalances and social injustices will never offer the solutions we need to step out of the vicious circles of ecological destruction, social exploitation and economic madness.

I do not have answers on how this path will look like. I only know that we need to start with these multi-fold and seemingly complicated perspectives, otherwise we will always only see parts of the problem (and the solution). We will have to make strong efforts to integrate the voices of the many and the unheard. We will have to reject any lukewarm policies that only focus on greening a small sector of our economy. We will always have to

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question the norms, paradigms and values that underpin our neoliberal and patriarchal system.

It will not be an easy way, it is the hardest road to go. But it will be the only road that will free us from capitalist exploitation, ecological destruction and all forms of social discrimination.

I would like to close with a wonderful quote of Audre Lorde, a most inspiring black and feminist US activist. She was saying this in the context of the debate of intersectionality and about sexist and racist experiences of women, however, it is as well true when it comes to fight the climate crisis: *“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”*

Thank you for your time, patience and your questions!

Janna Aljets studied Political Science in Berlin and worked for many years for an environmental NGO where she was responsible for degrowth, just transition and climate policies. She organized the Degrowth Conference 2014 in Leipzig coordinating the program designed by and for social movements.

Since 2015 Janna Aljets has been active in the climate justice movement in Germany, organizing mass actions of civil disobedience against lignite mining within the campaign “Ende Gelände”. She was the press spokesperson of the campaign in 2017. A few years ago, she started a dialogue between the workers of the biggest coalfields in Germany and the climate justice movement in order to tackle questions of just transition.

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