



African Journal of Climate Change and Resource Sustainability

ajccrs.eanso.org

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2022

Print ISSN: 790-962X | Online ISSN: 790-9638

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2790-9638>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/ajccrs.1.1.1039>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

31 December 2022

Keywords:

*Eco-feminists,
Climate Change,
Female
Environmentalists,
Gender,
Female Leaders,
Patriarchy.*

Largely using secondary data, this article presents critical commentary as to whether or not eco-feminists or female environmentalists can enhance or boost the fight against climate change, which poses a daunting challenge to humanity at large. This commentary is necessitated by the failure of numerous efforts by the international community to reverse the current trend of global carbon emissions to the required level. Marking the twenty-seventh (27th) milestone of the UN Conference of Parties (COP27) in November 2022 in Egypt, the international community is still confronted by a lack of unanimity in tackling the increasing global carbon emissions. Factors that strongly underscore the relevance or power of eco-feminists or female environmentalists to boost the fight against climate change are: (i) underperforming patriarchy; (ii) dichotomous gender stratification; (iii) the unique roles and /or qualities of females; and (iv) female sentiments represent more than half of global sentiments based on the huge number of female populations in the world. In conclusion, eco-feminists or female environmentalists can immensely boost the fight against climate change when they are effectively mainstreamed into the climate change discourse.

APA CITATION

Abdulai, A. M. (2022). Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change? *African Journal of Climate Change and Resource Sustainability*, 1(1), 107-114. <https://doi.org/10.37284/ajccrs.1.1.1039>.

CHICAGO CITATION

Abdulai, Abdul-Mumin. 2022. "Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?". *African Journal of Climate Change and Resource Sustainability* 1 (1), 107-114. <https://doi.org/10.37284/ajccrs.1.1.1039>.

HARVARD CITATION

Abdulai, A. M. (2022) "Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?", *African Journal of Climate Change and Resource Sustainability*, 1(1), pp. 107-114. doi: 10.37284/ajccrs.1.1.1039.

IEEE CITATION

A. M. Abdulai. "Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?", *AJCCRS*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 107-114, Dec. 2022.

MLA CITATION

Abdulai, Abdul-Mumin. "Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?". *African Journal of Climate Change and Resource Sustainability*, Vol. 1, no. 1, Dec. 2022, pp. 107-114, doi:10.37284/ajccrs.1.1.1039.

INTRODUCTION

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to rise, thereby making it more difficult to achieve the global target of reducing global emissions to maintain the global temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), during the 25th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP25) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Madrid, Spain in 2019, warned that global temperature would increase to 4 degrees Celsius by the end of the century if the current GHG emission trend was not reversed (UNFCCC, 2019).

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres remarked at the COP25 in 2019 that the frequent, deadly, and destructive climate-related natural disasters, which are causing more human and financial losses, were due largely to two main factors: (1) Negative Human Behaviour (which the UN Chief described as "War against Nature") and (2) Completely Inadequate Efforts by the international community to reverse the current trend of carbon emissions (UNFCCC, 2019).

In preparation for COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, the UN published a Report on Climate Change which stated categorically that "human activity is changing the climate in unprecedented and sometimes irreversible ways". For this reason, the UN Secretary-General described this Climate Report as "code red for humanity" (UN News, 2021). Despite this dire warning, world leaders missed an opportunity during COP26 to adopt

unanimous action as to how to reduce global carbon emissions.

The lack of unanimity among world leaders on climate change action has persisted, which characterised yet another golden opportunity, which is COP 27 hosted by Egypt from 6th to 18th November 2022. This gloomy climate change situation strongly indicates that world leaders are steadily losing the fight against climate change. See Voice of America's news item captioned "Nations fail to Reach Deal on UN Treaty to Protect Sea Life" (VOA, 2022). It is for this reason that this paper believes that the international community currently requires drastic measures to curb this drastic climate change situation. Hence, the need for leaders of the international community to begin exploring other viable alternative measures.

In this light, the author, for a good number of reasons given in the next section, is convinced that incorporating or mainstreaming eco-feminists or female environmentalists actively into climate change discourse will successfully reinvigorate the fight against climate change. For instance, the number of Female Prime Ministers and/or Presidents in the world is substantial to boost attaining the environmental goals of female environmentalists, especially in reducing global carbon emissions. As shown in *Table 1*, there are Twenty-Nine (29) Female Prime Ministers and/or Presidents and Vice presidents in the USA as of December 2022.

Table 1: Female Prime Ministers and/or Presidents

No.	Name	Designation	Country
1.	Sheikh Hasina Wajed	Prime Minister	Bangladesh
2.	Sandra Mason	President	Barbados
3.	Mette Frederiksen	Prime Minister	Denmark
4.	Kaja Kallas	Prime Minister	Estonia
5.	Sahle-Work Zewde	President	Ethiopia
6.	Sanna Marin	Prime Minister	Finland
7.	Rose Christiane Rasponda	Prime Minister	Gabon
8.	Salome Zourabichvili	President	Georgia
9.	Katerina Sakellariopoulou	President	Greece
10.	Xiomara Castros	President	Honduras
11.	Carrie Lam	Chief Executive	Hong Kong
12.	Katrin Jakobsdottir	Prime Minister	Iceland
13.	Giorgia Meloni	Prime Minister	Italy
13.	Ingrida Simonyte	Prime Minister	Lithuania
14.	Maia Sandu Saara	President	Moldova
15.	Kuugongelwa Amadhila	Prime Minister	Namibia
16.	Bidhya Devi Bhandari	President	Nepal
17.	Jacinda Ardern	Prime Minister	New Zealand
18.	Dina Boluarte	President	Peru
19.	Fiaame Naomi Mata'afa	Prime Minister	Samoa
20.	Ana Brnabic	Prime Minister	Serbia
21.	Halimah Yacob	President	Singapore
22.	Zuzana Caputova	President	Slovakia
23.	Magdalena Andersson	Prime Minister	Sweden
24.	Tsai Ing-wen	President	Taiwan
25.	Samia Suluhu Hassan	Prime Minister	Tanzania
26.	Victorie Tomegah Dogbe	Prime Minister	Togo
27.	Najia Bouden Ramadhane	Prime Minister	Tunisia
28.	Robinah Nabbanja	Prime Minister	Uganda
29.	Kamala Harris	Vice President	USA

Source: Modified from World Population Review (UN, 2022)

FACTORS THAT UNDERSCORE THE RELEVANCE OF ECO-FEMINISTS OR FEMALE ENVIRONMENTALISTS TO BOOST THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

There are various types of eco-feminism or female environmentalism. However, the author briefly explains the generic factors that make eco-feminists

or female environmentalists highly relevant in tackling the climate change menace.

Underperforming Patriarchy

At the heart of feminism, in general, is the issue of patriarchy, i.e., male-dominated culture. The root meaning of patriarchy is explained by Sultana (2011) as the control of a father or the patriarch over a family or household, which comprises women,

children, slaves and /or servants. Clearly, the concept of patriarchy refers to male domination in all spheres of society. Patriarchy, as a system of power and inequality, tilts socio-economic and political opportunities for males at the expense of females (Matandela, 2020). Therefore, feminists are particularly interested in correcting the heavily skewed power relationship, which creates the enabling environment for men to “dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Sultana, 2011). Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in many cultures. I described culture as the DNA of every society. I strongly believe that culture is the foundation of social identity. If culture is dominated by males, invariably, they are expected to manage the affairs of societies successfully but are unfortunately underperforming. Then, of course, that calls for capable females to complement or fill the gaps.

Patriarchy endorses the superiority and dominance of men over women in all facets of life. That includes decision-making, property rights, access to opportunities, and other essential material resources in society. With such unquestionable authority, dominance, and resources at the disposal of patriarchy, I believe strongly that patriarchal leadership of the international community could have tackled climate change confronting modern societies more effectively than they are currently doing, especially in the global south. With particular reference to Bangladesh, Sultana (2011) underscores the need for radical changes in the way patriarchal ideology is propagated in the country, which is inimical to the required social and economic progress.

The question one may ask is: why are such much-needed radical changes not made or not happening? This is because state actors of modern-day societies are fixated on the presumably magic wand of free market tools, technological know-how, and science to surmount all challenges bedeviling societies without any recourse or much attention being paid to social relations. Such fixation is described by

Amartya Sen in Harper et al. (2020) as comparative indifference to culture.

In searching for common ground between patriarchy and feminism to achieve prosperity for all males and females, Becker (1999) proposes relational feminism instead of cultural feminism. Relational feminism argues that societies cannot progress when hyper-masculinity is celebrated and championed, whereas feminine qualities are downgraded and disrespected. Nor can societies flourish when females celebrate and champion feminine attributes and denigrate masculine ones. Cultural feminism runs counter to patriarchal values.

Similarly, world leaders who are leading the fight against climate change are predominantly males. For instance, the UN has never been headed by a female since its inception. If such leadership of the international community is not making headway in tackling the climate crisis, it is justifiable for eco-feminists or female environmentalists to step up their efforts in partnership with female world leaders to tackle the existential threat posed by the increasing global carbon emissions. Aside from female world leaders, world religious organisations are other powerful stakeholders that eco-feminists can engage in bolstering their efforts. See Abdulai (2022) to understand the factors that underscore the relevance of world religious organisations in the fight against climate change.

Dichotomous Gender Stratification

Gender stratification or hierarchy in the global culture takes the form of dichotomy, i.e., culture or nature; men or women; male or female; he or she, etc. Becker (1999) posits that whereas men are associated with such admirable qualities as being “independent, invulnerable, tough, strong, aggressive, powerful, commanding, in control, rational, and non-emotional ... women are dependent, vulnerable, pliant, weak, supportive, nurturing, intuitive, emotional, and empathic” (p.

27). In such dichotomy, it is claimed that men's values and features are likened to culture and women's values, and features are likened to nature. As culture dominates nature, so are men dominating women and the environment (Barry, 2007).

In the same vein, production or industry is a domain solely occupied by males, and this male-dominated domain is income-generating or paid. Whereas reproduction or domestic chores and child care are solely assigned to females. This domain for females is largely unpaid (Harper et al., 2020). I believe such gender dichotomy will perpetuate income inequality between males and females, thereby further weakening the bargaining power of females in the power structure of modern societies. Until reproductive or domestic activities, which are preserved for females, are fully paid for and incorporated into calculating the gross domestic product (GDP) of countries, there will be no improvement in attempts to address gender labour inequality occasioned by dichotomous gender stratification.

When income-generating opportunities are disproportionately skewed away from females, it will increase their levels of vulnerability to climate change. Their adaptive capacities to climate change will be compromised severely. It is my belief that this will be counter-productive to the national efforts of UN member countries to boost adaptation and mitigation measures captured in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to fight climate change. We should be quick to remember that females constitute the other side of the usual gender dichotomy in our societies.

In that regard, I think eco-feminists or female environmentalists must not relent in the fight against *Negative Human Behaviour*, which UN Chief described as a "War against Nature" because women represent nature (Barry, 2007). Susan Griffin calls this dualistic mindset a kind of insanity that fuels or promotes the wanton destruction of the environment (Barry, 2007). Susan Griffin argues

that the androcentric or male-centred approach of modernity must change to improve the human relationship with nature (i.e., environment & women).

The Unique Roles and Qualities of Females

Due to certain qualities like childbirth, caretakers, homemakers, etc., women are essentially nearer or closer to nature than men. For this reason, environmental ill-health or the ravaging impacts of climate change (e.g., climate change-related disasters) are disproportionately felt by women and their children. A study conducted by an organisation called Women Deliver (2021) indicated that increasing temperatures, heat waves, erratic rainfall patterns, and droughts due to climate change affect maternal health greatly. For instance, dehydration is harmful to the mother and child during pregnancy. Foetal growth can be retarded, labour-inducing hormones are released quickly, preterm births are likely to occur, and the associated risk of eclampsia and anaemia.

Dehydration, as the study found, is exacerbated by water scarcity due to climate change, thereby making access to portable drinking water extremely difficult for pregnant women. Again, food insecurity, because of climate change, contributes to deficiencies of macro and micronutrients during pregnancies, which can cause complications during deliveries or low weight in newborns. Furthermore, women and their children or newborns are disproportionately affected by vector-borne diseases, for instance, malaria, due to increasing temperatures (Women Deliver, 2021).

On gender-based violence, Women Deliver (2021) found that water and food scarcities due to climate change expose females to gender-based violence, such as rape and bodily harm, as they trek many miles to get these scarce natural resources. Some country-based examples are cited in that study; (i) property losses and financial instability due to Australia's bushfires in 2009 increased domestic

violence against wives and children; (ii) the inability of families to feed and accommodate their children due to climate change-induced extreme weather conditions led to early marriages of female children in Malawi, which was estimated at 1.5 million girls; (iii) cyclone Nargis which ravaged Myanmar in 2008 compelled many females to engage in commercial sex work as a survival strategy, and (iv) the dwindling farm yields due to climate change in Indonesia fuelled female emigration to work overseas; thereby exposing them to many risks. It is against this background that eco-feminists or female environmentalists are highly passionate about promoting good environmental health. Hence, an urgent need to actively mainstream or incorporate eco-feminists or female environmentalists into the fight against climate change.

Female Sentiments Represent More than Half of the Global Sentiments

Just like other environmental movements which seek to raise public awareness of the dire need for communities, companies, and nations to treat or interact with the environment in sustainable ways, eco-feminists or female environmentalists are bringing on female board sentiments, which constitute the other half of the global cultural dichotomy. Women Deliver (2021) argues that promoting gender equality will ensure a more peaceful and productive world with much wealth and vitality. I believe strongly that this is a sentiment which is shared generally by all females and a majority of males. It is for this reason that United Nations Organization's (UN short) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute giant steps in the right direction. Especially SDG 5, which calls for gender equality in accessing opportunities in our societies and to stop discrimination against women and girls in all spheres of human endeavour (UN, 2015). As this paper looks at climate change leadership and how to tackle its negative impacts, SDG 5.5 urges member countries to ensure the full and effective

participation of women in, including equal opportunities for, leadership at all decision-making levels. For instance, in economic, political, and public domains.

Another general sentiment has to do with the negative impacts of climate change, which are disproportionately felt by females. An example is a debilitating impact of climate change on maternal health and gender-based violence, which are presented in the preceding sections (Women Deliver, 2021); again, SDG 13 urges UN member countries to take action to combat climate change and its associated impacts. Specifically, among others, SDG 13.1 urges member countries to take action by strengthening resilience and boosting the adaptive capacities of all citizens to natural disasters and other climate-induced hazards in all member countries (UN, 2015).

Incidentally, the female population is more than half of the global population that is vulnerable or susceptible to the negative impacts of climate change, particularly in the global south. The global population reached eight (8) billion in November 2022. Due to the higher female life expectancy at 73.8 compared to males at 68.4, there are more females than males at older ages in all regions. Globally, for instance, the percentage of women 65 years and above is 55.7 in 2022 (UN, 2022). This high number of females at older ages increases the number of vulnerable females globally to climate change impacts, especially in developing and least-developed countries. Eco-feminists or female environmentalists are the embodiment of female sentiments on environmental issues in a patriarchal society, particularly climate change. Therefore, this paper argues that when they are fully recognised and mainstreamed into the climate change discourse, eco-feminists or female environmentalists will push vehemently for solutions to tackle the climate crisis.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper takes a critical look at some factors that underscore the relevance of eco-feminists or female environmentalists to boost the fight against climate change. These factors include (i) the performance of patriarchal society in tackling climate change is below expectation, (ii) dichotomous gender stratification which is inimical to fully-fledged progress in our societies, (iii) the unique roles and qualities of females, which are highly hampered when the environment is poorly managed, (iv) female sentiments regarding the environment, especially climate change, reflect more than half of global environmental sentiments. For these reasons, the author is convinced strongly that eco-feminists or female environmentalists can successfully tackle the climate crisis when they are actively incorporated or mainstreamed into the fight against climate change. The author seizes this opportunity to entreat eco-feminists or female environmentalists around the world to rise up by actively collaborating with female world leaders to fix this climate change jigsaw puzzle. The world is indeed facing a serious existential climate threat.

On a light note, however, eco-feminists or female environmentalists should raise awareness of the need for their fellow women to desist from making ostentatious or flamboyant demands on men. Such demands will further fuel the wanton destruction of the environment. To which females and children are more susceptible. This is because all development resources emanate from the environment, which must be used sustainably.

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