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Climate change isn't sexist...

... but the way we talk about it is

A warm summer night falls over the red-light district of Angeles City, Philippines. Neon lights flicker as young girls linger outside bars, their faces exhausted. 'We want to provide for our families. We have to have sex with somebody who can pay us', one says. The devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 still lingers. Many families lost everything — their homes, their incomes, their hope. But the storm didn't just destroy infrastructure; it upended lives, forcing many women and girls to make desperate choices.

Meanwhile, Marufa Khatun, a young girl from Bangladesh, had just given birth to her first child. With cyclones and floods hitting the community, her family made a decision no parent should ever have to face and arranged the marriage of their 11-year-old daughter. Child marriage is directly linked to the climate crisis, with two-thirds of child marriages taking place in countries with above-average climate risks. This number is expected to increase by 33 per cent to nearly 40 million globally by 2050.

These stories are not isolated. Around the world, women and girls suffer disproportionately from the impacts of a warming planet. Their lives are shaped not only by more extreme weather events, but also by the social inequalities that the climate crisis exacerbates. The crisis deepens existing fault lines — of gender, class and race.

Hearing their stories brings us to the pressing question: how can we improve the status of women in the climate crisis? Many NGOs and journalists respond by recounting countless heart-breaking stories of women – like those of Marufa, and the young girls working in the red-light district of Angeles City – who are often portrayed as 'a homogeneous, powerless group of innocent victims'. But how helpful is this kind of narrative really?

Beware of the single narrative

The climate crisis is not sexist, but the world we live in is. And while many NGOs and journalists try to raise awareness of the

disproportionate impacts of climate change on women, their often very reductive storytelling has unforeseen and, at times, serious consequences.

The manifestation of stereotypes of poor, suffering and silent women – many of them coming from the Global South – erases the responsibility of the Global North. Inequalities are presented as biological and geographical *facts*. Women (of the Global South) must be saved by the generous charity of the Global North, erasing the socio-political and economic causes that underpin existing inequalities. Presenting suffering alone, without context and without questioning the underlying power relations, doesn't recognise the many ways in which global warming affects women's lives and thus distracts from solutions that could actually make a difference.

Moreover, the narrative of women as perpetual, helpless victims is simply wrong and takes away their agency. Women are the leading force in climate activism and play a key role in mitigating the crisis. In the 2000s, activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, along with 62 other Inuit petitioners from Alaska and Canada, launched the first legal action on climate change. They argued that unchecked greenhouse gas emissions from the United States were endangering the Inuit people, effectively violating their 'right to be cold'. Although the petition was rejected, it marked a turning point by reframing the climate crisis as an urgent human rights issue and paving the way for future action.

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Or take the example of Sônia Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá, two Indigenous women elected to Congress in Brazil who have shifted their national political landscape towards greater environmental protection and human rights. There are many more great women shaping the climate movement. Famous international lawyer Farhana Yamain, for example, played a key role in getting net zero emissions by 2050 included in the Paris Agreement.

But is highlighting the achievements of these women the solution to our narrative problem?

Many UN reports, such as 'Women and girls around the world are leading the fight against climate change', and newspaper articles, like *The Times*' 'Meet 15 Women Leading the Fight Against Climate Change', highlight women's roles as 'agents of change'. Anne Karpf, author of *How Women Can Save The Planet*, calls this 'the narrative of women as

climate saviours'.

Yet, this can lead to a similarly misleading perception as portraying women solely as the victims of the climate crisis. Because both narratives – 'women as victims' and women as 'those who care' – feed into the same deeply ingrained stereotypes. Women care for their families, their homes, their friends and, of course, the planet. Environmental care is now the responsibility of those who suffer most from it and who often find themselves in positions of powerlessness. When women are portrayed as either heroines or victims, the underlying power structures and inequalities that brought sexism into the climate crisis in the first place become invisible.

This raises the question: how can we improve the status of women in the climate crisis without falling into this single-narrative trap.

Funding, power, representation

One solution is quite simple and has been much discussed already: instead of talking *about* women, we need to amplify their voices. At the recent COP29, only eight out of the 78 world leaders in attendance were women. This lack of gender balance is a persistent issue: in 2023, women made up just 34 per cent of national delegates, and only two per cent of delegations achieved gender parity. These figures have remained stagnant over the past decade, perpetuating a glaring gender imbalance at one of the world's most influential climate conferences.

But it's not just about power — funding is also scarce. The UN has recognised the differing impacts of the climate crisis on women and men for over a decade, yet 'in 2022, just three per cent of all official development assistance on climate had gender equality-related objectives.' And despite women's leadership in climate activism, less than one per cent of international climate funding is allocated to initiatives led by women.

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Moreover, the climate crisis is still seen as a scientific, even technical, problem that requires a STEM-based solution. The problem with this approach is twofold: it ignores the social and political dimensions of the climate crisis, while the STEM sector is also still dominated by men. This leads to an over-representation of men in environmental policy-making.

The way we talk about climate and gender matters. Considering the

recent years' global backlash against women's rights, this becomes all the more true. Trump's rollback on the Paris Agreement and his perspective on gender will certainly not be helpful in finding equal climate solutions either.

Not to fall into the previously criticised stereotype — women in power will not heroically eradicate gender inequality or the climate crisis. However, not including women (or other marginalised groups) in the discussion will make existing gender inequalities much harder to identify and tackle. Women's climate activism is strong and by putting women in positions of power and financing their work, equal climate solutions can become possible. Most importantly, we all need to take a hard look at how we tell the story of women's role in the climate crisis — because we are not merely victims, but we don't want to be the lone heroes either.



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