

Feminists Regenerating the Economy and the Ecosphere

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Working Paper: A Structural Analysis of the Gender-Climate-Economy Nexus

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This is a Working Paper, hence it is a work in progress. We welcome any feedback on the paper, which can be sent to: erica@regionsrefocus.org.



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I. Introduction

For the past 500 years in which capitalism has been the dominant economic system, continuing profit accumulation has been dependent on the unsustainable use, commodification, privatization, and destruction of natural resources on the one hand, and exploitation of human resources on the other. Capitalism and its forms of exploitation are uneven across the world, to the extent that some parts of the global economy have been structured to subsidize the lifestyle, consumption, and progress of other people in the world, facilitated by violent colonization processes. The Global South continues to be used as a source of cheap raw materials and labor to produce goods consumed in the Global North and therefore to finance economic development in the industrialized countries. While natural resources have always fueled the metaphorical fire of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution greatly increased the ease and speed with which they could be destroyed. Industrial agriculture and fisheries, deforestation, large-scale mining operations, and the burning of non-renewable energy sources referred to as fossil fuels are only a few of the main human-led drivers of climate change. But the phrase ‘human-led climate change’ can be a bit of a misnomer because of the stark variations in the distribution of responsibility for worsening climate change. The burden of adjustment to climate change is also not distributed equally among countries, as developing countries contending with legacies of colonial plunder struggle to finance needed economic diversification and transformation.

It is common knowledge that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are the main cause of climate change, with carbon dioxide (CO₂) that results from the burning of fossil fuels as the number one source of warming and methane (largely emitted by the industrial agriculture sector) at number two.¹ Rapid and uneven economic growth over the last ~200 years has come at the cost of the environment and the majority of people: 157 multinational corporations (MNCs), the majority of which are based in the Global North, are responsible for up to 60% of global industrial emissions, and 20 fossil fuel corporations have contributed more than one third of total GHG emissions.² These corporations also hoard wealth: owned and managed by some of the richest people on the planet, they systematically exploit workers, consumers, and states to increase their own profits. The wealthiest 1% of people contribute as much to GHG emissions as the poorest 66% of the global population.³

As total ecospheric⁴ breakdown looms, the majority of the world economy is continuing with business as usual. Global economic and social inequality, food and water insecurity, and environmental degradation continue to get worse every second that transformative action is not

¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2023. “Summary for Policymakers.” In *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*, 1–34. Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC.

² Haddad, Mona, Victor Steenbergen, and Abhishek Saurav. 2023. “Why large multinational firms hold the key to accelerating countries’ decarbonization strategies.” *World Bank Blogs*, 23 May 2023; Taylor, Matthew, and Jonathan Watts. 2019. “Revealed: The 20 Firms Behind a Third of All Carbon Emissions.” *The Guardian*, 9 October 2019.

³ Khalfan, Ashfaq, Astrid Nilsson Lewis, Carlos Aguilar, Jaqueline Persson, Max Lawson, Nafkote Dabi, Safa Jayoussi, and Sunil Acharya. 2023. “Climate Equality: A Planet for the 99%.” Oxfam. <https://doi.org/10.21201/2023.000001>.

⁴ Term meaning the area around a planet that contains everything needed to sustain life.

taken, but there are a myriad of obstacles standing in the way of true transformation. Environmental governance systems are fragmented and do not reflect the connectivity of ecosystems, global governance is dominated by private and corporate interests, and the people who have contributed the least to climate change are the most impacted but have the fewest resources to respond to it. Communities across the South— especially women, small-holder farmers, fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and other marginalized groups— are not only the most affected by changes in the planet’s ability to sustain life but are also being dispossessed by land and ocean grabs enabled by predatory green and blue economic models. For women and girls, the presence of powerful private interests comes with a rise in gender-based violence (GBV), including femicides and hate crimes against people with diverse SOGIESC,⁵ the majority of which go unacknowledged. This is facilitated by patriarchal systems of oppression rooted in white supremacy which maintain unjust global governance systems and stack the rules against the most marginalized. Continuing historical injustice is inseparable from the fact that it is those who are most vulnerable to, and least responsible for, climate change bearing the brunt of its impacts and effects.

II. Establishing the gender-climate-economy nexus

Devastating consequences have arisen from the intersection of socioeconomic and gender inequality in the context of climate change. Women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men in natural disasters.⁶ In the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, women accounted for 61% of fatalities; in the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, women accounted for 70–80% of fatalities; and in the 2008 cyclone in Myanmar, women accounted for 91% of fatalities.⁷ As climate change brings with it an increase in both the frequency and severity of natural disasters, exacerbating gender-based inequalities, this poses particular risks to women and girls. Feminist analysis has attributed the gap in mortality rates to: differences in crisis preparation based on gendered access to training opportunities; unequally distributed care work which means that men can escape disasters alone while women are still responsible for children and family members; and the risk of GBV while trying to escape disasters causing women to wait longer at home in hopes a male relative will come back for them.⁸ Meanwhile, the aftermath of climate-induced disasters (CIDs) is characterized by a loss of subsistence livelihoods and an increase in poverty rates (which are already higher globally among women). Women are therefore more affected by not only CIDs themselves but also by their aftermath: increases in poverty have been linked with increases in both forced and child marriages, which in turn lead to increases in GBV. After two tropical cyclones hit Vanuatu in 2018, there was a

⁵ Acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

⁶ Okai, Asako. 2022. “Women are hit hardest in disasters, so why are responses too often gender-blind?” *UNDP*, 24 March 2022.

⁷ Habtezion, Senay. 2013. “Gender and disaster risk reduction.” Policy brief. UNDP.

⁸ Cannon, Terry. 2002. “Gender and Climate Hazards in Bangladesh.” *Gender & Development* 10 (2): 45–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070215906>; Gaard, Greta. 2015. “Ecofeminism and Climate Change.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 49: 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.02.004>; Goldsworthy, Heather. 2010. “Women, Global Environmental Change and Human Security.” In *Global Environmental Change and Human Security*, edited by Jon Barnett, Richard A. Matthew, Bryan McDonald, and Karen L. O’Brien, 215–35. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

300% increase in domestic violence cases reported by women.⁹ Similarly, sexual, domestic, and GBV occurrences skyrocket in the aftermath of CIDs, especially in times of climate-induced displacement. This is particularly troubling in light of the estimate that 80% of people displaced by climate change are women.¹⁰ Furthermore, in response to calls for population control which are common in the fallout of natural disasters, women also face loss of reproductive freedom.

Capitalism is dependent on women providing the majority of unpaid domestic and care labor: women's unpaid labor enables men's paid labor and is necessary to continuing capitalist extraction of men's surplus labor. This basic dynamic and unequal burden on women has remained constant throughout the different stages of capitalism, though it has notably been exacerbated as women are facing rising poverty, food insecurity, and displacement in the face of climate change. ILO figures show women performing 76% of unpaid work globally, reaching 80% in Asia and the Pacific.¹¹ Typical care work responsibilities of women in the Global South include gathering natural resources such as food, firewood, and drinking water, but with the resource scarcity imposed by climate change, this provisioning becomes more difficult. They already need to travel further and further to find these resources, increasing the risk of GBV as well as increasing the burden of care work. In times of food scarcity, women are more likely to forego food consumption so that their family and children can eat, leading to an increase in women's mortality and health problems. Eventually, women may not be able to meet their family's natural resource needs due to climate-induced scarcity; lack of access to education, financial and credit services, and employment training means that the need for monetary income pushes them into informal and/or exploitative employment.

Women have long been disproportionately represented in low-paid, low-skilled jobs in agricultural and manufacturing sectors and in service and domestic work; this trend is only increasing as more women find it more and more difficult to provide for their family. Even in their paid work, women are more impacted than men by climate-induced changes in the landscape, leading to a cycle of women's food and economic insecurity. Women remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid, with their unpaid labor invisibilized, diminished, and taken for granted, and both their paid and unpaid labor fueling a destructive economic system that is actively worsening their marginalization.

As many feminists highlight, there is no one 'woman's experience': not all women are impacted equally by intersecting economic and climate injustice. Class, ethnicity, disability, race, and sexual orientation are examples of mediating factors of not just women's lived experiences in society but also of women's relationships with nature. Where women are located in the global capitalist economy, in terms of both geography and labor markets, determines and shapes the challenges and opportunities available for them to meet their needs and respond to problems of climate change.

⁹ UN Women. 2015. "Climate Change, Disaster and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific." Policy brief.

¹⁰ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 2022. "Climate change exacerbates violence against women and girls." *OHCHR*, 12 July 2022.

¹¹ International Labour Organization (ILO). 2018. "Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work."

A. Food insecurity: Gendered economic and climate consequences

Food insecurity is one of the most devastating manifestations of gendered global economic inequality and is significantly worsening in the face of the climate crisis. The intrinsic importance of access to nutritious, affordable food has been overridden by the desire to accumulate wealth: trade in food was worth \$1.7 trillion as of 2021, yet 2.3 billion people are food insecure worldwide.¹² Trade in food is dominated by MNCs located in a small group of developed countries ('agribusiness'); these MNCs are some of the richest in the world, and the single largest methane emitters.¹³ Many of the most profitable food products for MNCs, including coffee, cocoa, and tea, are intensively farmed in the Global South by smallholder farmers; these farmers provide the raw materials that form the first link of trillion-dollar value chains, yet the majority live in poverty and food insecurity.¹⁴ Combined with chronic state underinvestment in smallholder productive capacity, rural economies, with women as the main economic agents in them, have been devastated by capitalism. The livelihoods of hundreds of millions of smallholder farmers, along with agricultural production for domestic consumption, have been decimated by MNCs. Their continued dominance and profits have come at the cost of the health of the environment and created food insecurity and poverty across the Global South.

Smallholder farmers manage 60% of global food production and 80% of total arable land.¹⁵ In Africa, 70% of the economically active population is engaged in small-scale agriculture but this labor contributes an average of only 25% of national GDPs; as an average across Africa and Asia, small-scale agriculture provides an estimated 80% of domestic food production.¹⁶ As an average in Latin America and the Caribbean, smallholder farmers contribute an estimated 50% of domestic food production, and in rural areas an average of 55% of the economically active population is engaged in small-scale agriculture.¹⁷ Despite the crucial role they play, smallholder farmers in the Global South are some of the poorest people in the world, especially women smallholder farmers, who make up more than half of the small-scale agricultural workforce and who tend to produce less than male farmers due to their caring responsibilities. With markets pried open by trade liberalization, cheap imports of industrially produced food from the Global North have been systematically dumped into the South, suppressing the price of food and preventing farmers from receiving fair prices for their crops. At the same time, agriculture is one of the most

¹² United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). 2024. "New UNCTAD-WHO analysis reveals trends in processed foods trade." *UNCTAD*, 7 March 2024; World Health Organization (WHO). 2024. "Hunger numbers stubbornly high for three consecutive years as global crises deepen: UN report." *WHO*, 24 July 2024.

¹³ Changing Markets Foundation and Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy (IATP). 2022. "Emissions Impossible: How emissions from big meat and dairy are heating up the planet."

¹⁴ Liu, Wan-Hsin, Finn Ole Semrau, and Aoife Hanley. 2021. "International coffee trade: Multinational corporations should take more responsibility." *Kiel Institute for the World Economy*, 28 January 2021; Oxfam. 2023. "Chocolate giants reap huge profits as promises to improve farmers' incomes "ring hollow." Press release.

¹⁵ Loukos, Panos, and Leslie Arathoon. 2021. "Landscaping the agritech ecosystem for smallholder farmers in Latin America and the Caribbean." Technical Note No. IDB-TN-2084, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

¹⁶ Odiwuor, Florence. 2022. "Women Smallholder Farmers: What is the Missing Link for the Food System in Africa?" *Wilson Center*, 7 December 2022.

¹⁷ Loukos and Arathoon 2021.

climate-vulnerable sectors, as climate change impacts such as disruptions to atmospheric composition, water scarcity, and changing weather patterns determine soil health and crop yields; without adequate government support or financial resources, smallholder farmers can do little to mitigate the impacts of climate change on their crop yields, leading to worsening poverty rates and food and water insecurity, with women being the most impacted.

Similarly, fisheries across the Global South are already seeing significant decreases in fish stocks due to overfishing driven by MNCs, combined with climate change impacts such as biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, rising sea temperatures, and coral bleaching. This is particularly an issue in big ocean states¹⁸ where small-scale fisheries have traditionally provided a source of livelihood for many of the poorest people, as well as a traditional component of local diets. Although women account for less than half of the people involved in small-scale fishing activities,¹⁹ women are disproportionately informally employed in the sector, leading to higher rates of job and food insecurity among women, as well as systematic discounting of women's contributions to and challenges in the sector. Across the Global South, it is women farmers and fisherfolk who are disproportionately impacted by changing productive capacities of land and oceanscapes, in both their paid and unpaid work.

In the case of both agriculture and fisheries, reductions in food production across the Global South due to climate change are further exacerbating dependence on industrially produced food imports. Dependence on imports has huge macroeconomic effects as it makes states extremely vulnerable to external shocks and fluctuations in commodity prices, whether due to inflation or to economic crises. This leads to a cycle of debt creation at international financial institutions (IFIs) so states can pay for basic necessities such as food imports, that then leads to loan conditionalities which call for trade liberalization and pave the way for privatization, which in turn increases inequality, especially gender inequality. Without intervention in the form of progressive trade legislation, this cycle endlessly repeats, as the loans and conditionalities were never intended to 'solve' any problems but rather to lock in and exacerbate existing ones.

B. Critical minerals: A gendered scramble to profit from the climate crisis

The same actors who have commodified and extracted natural resources, and bear disproportionate responsibility for the climate crisis, are attempting to transform it into another economic opportunity. This has caused global economic inequality to filter into climate (false) solutions, as the push for a transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy— fueled by critical minerals extracted from the Global South— has created a new frontier for MNCs and other powerful private interests. This neocolonial dynamic is the epitome of a false solution to the climate crisis, and the antithesis of a just transition; the only problem it provides a solution to is how to increase the profit margins of Northern-based MNCs and private interests. As Global South activists and civil society

¹⁸ An alternative term to small island developing states (SIDS) put forward by local communities, emphasizing the capabilities, agency, and resources of these territories.

¹⁹ There is a long-standing debate about how 'fisheries' are defined, as a more narrow definition tends to exclude fishing activities women are overrepresented in.

have long said, a legitimate *just* (i.e., fair, related to notions of *justice*) transition encompasses energy sovereignty, investment in a regenerative economy, climate adaptation across sectors, mobility of people, social investments (i.e., health care, education, training), and national ownership over the sustainable use of critical minerals— including the policy space to invest revenue derived from their extraction.

Oceans have been transformed into the backbone of the so-called blue economy, a new frontier for minerals that threatens to disrupt the most important stable regulator of the planet's climate. Despite a voiced commitment to the sustainable use of ocean resources, the growth of the blue economy has facilitated the industrialization of oceans through an increase in investment in destructive practices such as deep-sea mining (DSM).²⁰ Feminists in big ocean states are leading fights to ban DSM and keep it from wreaking social and environmental havoc on their communities. The exact environmental impacts (or rather the extent of the destruction) of DSM are not even known, as very little has been discovered about the huge concentration of species who live in affected ecosystems.²¹ But this lack of knowledge has not dissuaded MNCs from attempting to push through contracts enabling them to begin exploration of the deep sea. DSM would effectively sign the ocean's death sentence, as it would change the distribution of heat, cause the extinction of an innumerable number of species, and disrupt the natural balance of ancient ecosystems, including the most stable carbon storage systems. Furthermore, it would worsen the existing issues the ocean is already facing such as ocean acidification, rising sea temperatures, and coral bleaching which are already profoundly impacting the lives of frontline communities, and disproportionately impacting women.

On land, the so-called green economy has given way to a significant increase in fossil fuel and mineral extraction from the ground in countries across the Global South. Mineral resources are extracted to benefit the energy transition in the North while the lowest emitting and most marginalized people in the South bear the brunt of climate change.²² Africa is one of the main concentrations of land-based critical minerals, making it very attractive as a frontier for private interests. The effects of climate change are particularly pronounced in Africa, as large parts of the continent have been plagued by increasing drought, desertification, floods, wildfires, intensifying storms, and hurricanes and are exacerbated by underfunded public services to help people prepare or recover in the aftermath. While the majority of the minerals needed to enable African states' energy transition are located within their own lands, the operations which extract the minerals from the ground are predominantly run by foreign MNCs and produced primarily for export to European

²⁰ Bennett, Nathan James, Jessica Blythe, Carole Sandrine White, and Cecilia Campero. 2021. "Blue Growth and Blue Justice: Ten Risks and Solutions for the Ocean Economy." *Marine Policy* 125 (March): 104387.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104387>; Nthia, Josephine Mabuti. 2021. "Blue Economy and Collaborative Strategies: A Critique of Multi-National Enterprises." *Journal of Global Business Insights* 6 (1): 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.5038/2640-6489.6.1.1146>.

²¹ Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) and Earth Law Center. 2023. "Deep-Sea Mining Issue Brief."

²² Unmüßig, Barbara, Wolfgang Sachs, and Thomas Fatheuer. 2012. "Critique of the Green Economy: Toward Social and Environmental Equity." Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation; Wanner, Thomas. 2015. "The New 'Passive Revolution' of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the 'Sustainable Development' of Neoliberal Capitalism." *New Political Economy* 20 (1): 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.866081>.

and other Northern markets. The EU's demand for critical minerals plays a major role in their production and related GHG emissions, which is now being penalized through unilateral trade measures such as the infamous carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM).

Mining is also highly gendered, from the demographic of mining workforces to environmental impacts.²³ As male dominated workforces move into the area to work in mining, risks of GBV skyrocket for women in mining communities, especially Indigenous women.²⁴ Furthermore, large-scale mining operations are some of the most environmentally destructive activities in the world, and women are more impacted than men by degradation of the environment. This is so not only in their roles as subsistence providers of scarce natural resources but also as caregivers of increasingly ill children and families, not to mention their own health risks on top of which burdens of unpaid care work rest. The current scramble of Northern-based MNCs to extract critical minerals represents a threat to communities across the Global South, especially women in rural and Indigenous communities.

III. Failures of multilateralism

Global governance systems have been set up to enable the continuing access of MNCs to markets and resources in the Global South so they can continue producing in the South for consumption in the North. As such, a key defining feature of both global economic and climate governance is corporate capture by Northern-based MNCs and the Northern private sector more generally. Transformative climate policy agendas have been derailed by Northern MNCs, the private sector, and their governments, who want to continue with business as usual to preserve their profits and financial dominance even in the face of rapidly accelerating ecological breakdown. These profits are built on the back of some of the world's poorest women, whose labor forms the foundation of exploitative global value chains (GVCs)—which account for a growing portion of international trade, global GDP, and employment. Meanwhile, for decades, progressive economic agendas put forward by Global South states and civil society have been buried by these same actors for the same reason.

The deficiencies of multilateralism are reflected in the sheer inadequacy of the development and climate finance made available to developing countries by developed countries; in the myriad failures of implementation of economic, environmental, and climate policy commitments; and in the growing presence of corporate and private sector representatives in multilateral economic, environmental, and climate spaces. Leading trade and finance institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank, and climate governance regimes such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), put

²³ Hofmann, Susanne, and Melisa Cabrapan Duarte. 2021. "Gender and Natural Resource Extraction in Latin America: Feminist Engagements with Geopolitical Positionality." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 0 (111): 39. <https://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10653>; Major, Chelsea, Sheri Longboat, and Silvia Sarapura-Escobar. 2023. "Gender, Indigeneity and Mining." In *Local Communities and the Mining Industry*, by Nicolas D. Brunet and Sheri Longboat, 1st ed., 75–99. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003182375-6>.

²⁴ Not all mining operations are male dominated. Most women who work in mining, however, work in small-scale artisanal mining, which is itself marked by high rates of gender-based violence.

developing countries at a structural disadvantage by disproportionately giving rich countries, and the fossil fuel and corporate interests they represent, agenda- and rule-setting power.

In the finance arena, rich countries (namely the US, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, the UK, Canada, and Japan) control over half of the vote in both the IMF and World Bank, while Global South countries (which constitute a combined 85% of world population and 30-40% of world GDP) have a minority vote in both institutions. Despite the stated goals of the IMF and World Bank to promote economic development and wellbeing, their lending practices and conditionalities have continuously enriched developed countries and created chronic indebtedness of developing countries. In the trade arena, despite developing countries' best attempts at fighting against stacked odds, their chances of progress are slim. Even as COVID-19 was raging through the Global South, a request submitted by South Africa and India to the WTO to waive TRIPS²⁵ protections on lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines (which would benefit all developing countries) was blocked by the US, European Union, and Switzerland, where the manufacturers of the four major vaccines (Johnson & Johnson and Moderna, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca, respectively) are headquartered.

In both the environmental and climate arenas, corporate capture of multilateral spaces by the worst perpetrators of ecospheric destruction is painstakingly clear. At the November 2024 negotiations on a UN Plastics Treaty, 220 fossil fuel and chemical industry lobbyists attended, constituting the largest single delegation.²⁶ The same trend can be observed at COP29, where over 1,700 coal, oil, and gas lobbyists attended— outnumbering the combined 1,033 delegates of the 10 most climate vulnerable countries.²⁷ Given these numbers, it is unsurprising that multilateral environmental governance has failed to prevent the looming extinction of a million species,²⁸ and climate governance has failed to bring about meaningful action on emissions reductions. It is even less surprising after considering the history of these governance arenas, which begins with the 1987 *Our Common Future* report (also known as the 'Brundtland report') and the creation of the concept of sustainable development. The Brundtland report raised alarms about radical threats to the environment, linked environmental issues to economic development, and was the first time climate change appeared in a UN report. However, it enshrined economic growth as the best path forward to address poverty in the South and overconsumption in the North, and also did not recognize the gendered, unequal impacts that climate change would have. In other words, it did not deliver a complete structural analysis.

Attempts were made to dive deeper into some systemic issues through the 1992 Rio Conventions, in particular through articulating the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) in the UNFCCC. CBDR-RC codifies the need to differentiate between the responsibilities of different countries for meeting future climate and development goals

²⁵ Acronym for the WTO Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement, which safeguards corporate profits through restrictive patents.

²⁶ Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL). 2024. "Fossil Fuel Lobbyists Flood Final Scheduled Round of Global Plastics Treaty Negotiations." *CIEL*, 24 November 2024.

²⁷ Noor, Dharna. 2024. "Over 1,700 coal, oil and gas lobbyists granted access to Cop29, says report." *The Guardian*, 15 November 2024.

²⁸ UN Environment Programme (UNEP). 2022. CBD/COP/DEC/15/4, Annex 1.

“because of disparities in capabilities, including those that are historically rooted.”²⁹ CBDR-RC in the UNFCCC enabled the sorting of countries according to their levels of development and corresponding emissions reduction responsibilities, which translated to legally binding emissions targets in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.³⁰ Aspirations for the UNFCCC were to facilitate the reduction of emissions and curb climate change on the one hand, and to facilitate finance flows from developed to developing countries to support climate change mitigation and adaptation on the other.³¹ Despite these aspirations, the Convention did not specify any quantity of finance and has largely failed to live up to hopes on both fronts.

In 2010, a commitment for \$100 billion of climate finance per year from developed to developing countries by 2020 was agreed.³² Even at the time, this amount would have been inadequate to meet the needs of developing countries— it was an arbitrary figure seemingly pulled out of thin air. In 2015, the Paris Agreement extended the timeline of the \$100 billion yearly commitment to 2025 and agreed to launch a process towards what is now known as the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) for climate finance, to be decided at the 29th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP29).³³ The measly \$100 billion commitment was never met,³⁴ and an insulting \$300 billion yearly commitment by 2035 was agreed upon at the recent COP29.³⁵ Adding further insult to injury, the composition of this \$300 billion was left unspecified, meaning non-concessional loans from multilateral development banks (MDBs) can continue to be counted towards this goal, worsening debt crises and related social inequities from crushing debt servicing.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all UN member states in 2015, can be seen as another attempt to address some of the deficiencies of the Brundtland Report. It aimed to bridge social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, encapsulated in 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which range from ending poverty (1) to achieving gender equality (5), reducing inequality within and between countries (10), taking action on climate change (13), and protecting life below water (14). The SDGs are meant to be applicable to all, with customized national targets set by each country meant to adapt them to local contexts. But in practice this attempt at universality has dispensed with notions of climate justice, as the Agenda fails to address the different responsibilities of countries for climate change and different capacities for

²⁹ Williams, Mariama, and Manuel F. Montes. 2017. “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities: Which Way Forward?” *Development* 59: 114–120. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-017-0097-6>.

³⁰ Stoddard, Isak, Kevin Anderson, Stuart Capstick, Wim Carton, Joanna Depledge, Keri Facer, Clair Gough, Frederic Hache, Claire Hoolohan, et al. 2021. “Three Decades of Climate Mitigation: Why Haven’t We Bent the Global Emissions Curve?” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 46: 653–689. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-012220-011104>.

³¹ Williams, Mariama. 2024 (unpublished). “Climate Finance Explainer 2.” Global Afro-Descendant Climate Justice Collaborative.

³² UNFCCC. 2010. FCCC/CP/2010/7/Add.1,” para 98.

³³ UNFCCC. 2016. “FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1,” para. 53.

³⁴ \$101 billion of climate finance was supposedly provided in 2022. However, civil society has contested the veracity of this claim, as this amount includes ODA and non-concessional loans. See for example: Oxfam. 2023. “Climate Finance Shadow Report 2023: Assessing the delivery of the \$100 billion commitment.”

³⁵ Babayev, Mukhtar. 2024. “I’m glad we got a deal at Cop29 – but western nations stood in the way of a much better one.” *The Guardian*, 25 November 2024.

responding to it. The path to achieve the SDGs has been rocky, with convoluted and voluntary reporting requirements and no consequences for lack of progress, including developed countries' failure to meet emissions reductions targets. At this point, most of the 2030 Agenda is impossible to achieve on the proposed timeline due to inadequate finance, technology development and transfer, and capacity building.

Likewise, gender-just climate policies and differentiated, gender-responsive economic policies remain to be delivered through multilateral climate negotiations and implementation. Despite the role of women in sustainable development being well-elaborated in Agenda 21, it remained a marginal issue within the Biodiversity and Desertification Conventions, and was omitted altogether from the UNFCCC. The issue of women's participation and representation in UNFCCC discussions and implementation was first acknowledged in 2001 and gradually expanded to include gender and climate issues in decisions of COPs from 2012 onwards— representing over 20 years of feminist advocacy. Nonetheless, gender remains a contested issue at every COP and UNFCCC-related discussion, and is among the most under-resourced aspects of UNFCCC implementation.

As far as root causes of climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)— the main body responsible for investigating the causes of climate change— has recognized that climate change is anthropogenic (human-created) since its inception, but it wasn't until 2022 that it explicitly identified colonialism as a driver of climate change, “for both ecosystems and people.”³⁶ Furthermore, while the UNFCCC calls for emissions reductions, the replacement of the binding Kyoto Protocol with nationally determined contributions (NDCs) albeit doomed the path to staying within the carbon budget and limiting global warming to 1.5°C. All indications point to the fact that the voluntary structure of NDCs will simply lead to a glaring lack of change. Continuing economic growth of the Global North at the expense of the Global South has asymmetrical negative impacts on women, as well as having devastating climate and ecological impacts. Achieving gender equality, taking urgent action on climate change, and ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns is not possible if unbridled economic growth is still the primary objective of *all* countries. There is no robust framework for elaborating urgent action on the gender-economy-climate nexus.

IV. Conclusion: Some successes and moving forward

There is a rich history of Global South-led efforts to meet the needs of the South despite shortcomings and failures of multilateralism, which provides a bright spot in the middle of bleak reality. This includes the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the New Economic International Order (NIEO) in the 1960s and 1970s through to recent South-led developments in global governance. For example, in 2019, a resolution seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on states' human rights obligations to address climate change was brought to the UN General Assembly by Vanuatu. It was adopted by consensus and went on to the ICJ for an

³⁶ IPCC. 2022. “Summary for Policymakers,” p. 12. In *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*.

advisory opinion. Another example is Bonaire's case in the Dutch State Court, initiated in 2023, charging The Netherlands with human rights violations related to insufficient climate action.

2024 alone has seen three significant governance developments spurred by South states. First, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) issued a landmark advisory opinion in May 2024 outlining states' legal obligations to reduce GHG emissions which contribute to climate change and ocean pollution, brought about by a request submitted by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law's (COSIS). This has significant relevance for the International Seabed Authority's ongoing work on DSM regulations. Second, in July 2024, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion declaring Israel's occupation of Palestine unlawful and ordering the occupation to end rapidly. This advisory opinion came about as a result of South Africa's actions, who initiated proceedings in the ICJ against Israel; after South Africa brought the original case, South states were the first to sign on, including Nicaragua, Colombia, and Mexico. Though not on climate change per se, this case has direct ecological consequences due to the sheer volume of emissions generated by the indiscriminate bombing of Palestinian territories; it also has serious gender consequences because Palestinian women and girls are disproportionately represented among those who have been killed by violence, starvation, malnourishment, and lack of medical attention—all direct consequences of Israel's actions and continuing occupation. Finally, and most recently, in September 2024, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Samoa submitted a formal proposal to amend the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to recognize ecocide as a crime alongside genocide and war crimes. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has since signed on to this proposal.

At the same time that these successes initiated by Global South states must be celebrated, due recognition must be given to Global South feminists and other social movements who have been pushing their respective governments for decades to take their fights forward into various policy fora. Women in and from the Global South have long been at the forefront of efforts to resist and dismantle continuing climate injustice. But in this sense, they have been faced with a double, or even triple, burden: not only to bear the brunt of climate change impacts while continuing to perform unpaid care work, but also to spearhead efforts to work against the systems that have created them—to try and make a difference in the face of deeply unequal governance regimes.

In 2023, Indigenous women in Guyana spearheaded the collection of data on carbon storage in mangrove ecosystems (places their communities traditionally inhabit and which are being severely impacted by climate change).³⁷ The data they collected proved the immense importance of mangrove ecosystems in global carbon storage—something Indigenous women and communities who inhabit these areas have long known but which had previously been unsubstantiated and therefore unacknowledged by Western science—and directly led to (historic) environmental protections of these ecosystems being passed earlier in 2024.³⁸ In Ecuador, Indigenous women-led resistance

³⁷ Coto, Dánica. 2023. "Flying drones and chasing data, Indigenous women in Guyana join fight against climate change." *Associated Press*, 25 May 2023.

³⁸ Vander Velde, Bruno. 2024. "One small country, one giant leap for nature." *Conservation International*, 26 July 2024.

against proposed petroleum mining in Yasuní National Park (one of the most biodiverse places on the planet and the home of many of Ecuador's Indigenous groups, including some living in voluntary isolation) culminated in a 2023 national referendum which banned mining in Yasuní.³⁹ Through ten years of activism, Indigenous women built popular support for what they have known was at stake since petroleum operations began encroaching on their lands fifty years ago and resulted in worsening health outcomes, deforestation, pollution, and disappearing biodiversity. Of those who tragically lost their lives in confrontations resulting from illegal mining in Yasuní over the past decade, the majority were Indigenous women and children. Other similar cases include Itsekiri women in Nigeria putting their bodies on the line and forcing Chevron to halt operations until they had their demands met;⁴⁰ Afro-descendant women in Colombia spearheading a popular campaign and winning a Constitutional Court case against illegal mining (both unpermitted and government-sanctioned) on their land;⁴¹ and Sioux and Chipewyan women leaders in Canada and the US mounting a popular resistance campaign over 15 years against the Keystone XL Pipeline, which was officially canceled by US President Joe Biden on his first day in office in 2021.⁴²

These are only a few examples of Indigenous women leading fights against destructive capitalist forces. It is no coincidence that in some of the most significant climate 'wins' in recent memory, Indigenous women have been at the forefront. Nor is it just: they are playing stand-in roles for broken governance systems that fail to look out for the public good, and actively marginalize them. Gender and climate justice will not and cannot be achieved without addressing looming questions of the longevity of the current world order, from global governance and flailing multilateralism to an increasingly unstable and unequal economy. What is the future of multilateral institutions as we know them? Even contested spaces such as the WTO are losing their power as Global North member states feel emboldened to sidestep multilateral precedents, processes, and rules altogether and implement unilateral measures. And despite the widely publicized 'win' constituted by the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund, there have been major issues in capitalizing the Fund, including disagreement over previously agreed (and watered down) yearly targets.⁴³ Where are the fundamental principles of global solidarity? And on the topic of the economy, are gender and climate justice even possible within a capitalist system? To prevent further ecological breakdown, not only the scale of the economy (i.e., how much is produced and consumed) but also the composition of the economy (i.e., what is produced and consumed and how it is transported) must radically and urgently change. These are not easy questions to answer, and they lead to one even larger, central question: what is the basis of a feminist economic (and world) order?

³⁹ Bernal, Angélica María, and Joshua Holst. 2023. "Ecuador Votes to Keep Yasuní Oil in the Ground in Historic Referendum." *North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)*, 23 August 2023.

⁴⁰ Tania Branigan and John Vidal. 2002. "Hands up or we strip!" *The Guardian*, 21 July 2002.

⁴¹ Bratspies, Rebecca. 2020. "'Territory is Everything': Afro-Colombian Communities, Human Rights and Illegal Land Grabs." *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 4 (290): 291–323.

⁴² Engelfried, Nick. 2021. "Overwhelming odds, unexpected alliances and tough losses — how defeating Keystone XL built a bolder, savvier climate movement." *Waging Nonviolence*, 29 January 2021; Lakhani, Nina. 2021. "No more broken treaties: indigenous leaders urge Biden to shut down Dakota Access pipeline." *The Guardian*, 21 January 2021.

⁴³ For a history and detailed explanation of the Loss and Damage Fund, and discussion of its issues, see for example: Schalatek, Liane, and Julie-Anne Richards. 2024. "The Loss and Damage Fund Board: Getting It Right from the Start." *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 18 March 2024.