

Queering the Gender-Climate Nexus



An intersectional exploration into the impacts of climate change and policies for LGBTIQ+ communities

The phenomenon of climate change is commonly perceived as a generalized, impending doom shared by all of humanity. Yet the impacts of climate change are already evident and indisputable throughout the world today – only they are unevenly distributed and disproportionately experienced. As a human-induced event, climate change is inherently political and a matter of social justice, wherein climate justice addresses the stark inequalities between who is causing it and who is most suffering its effects.¹ Climate injustice can be seen from a global view, as the rich countries of the Global North who account for just 12 percent of the global population are responsible for 50 percent of all historical planet-warming greenhouse gasses released from fossil fuels and industry over the past 170 years.² Meanwhile the carbon footprints of low income countries in the Global South are generally very low, and yet they are the most exposed and least shielded from the effects of climate change. Climate injustice can also be seen within countries: the social dimensions of gender, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, indigeneity, race and class, among others, that determine who is most and least affected, as well as who most and least benefits from climate policy solutions.

This briefing paper focuses on gender as a particularly crucial social dimension of climate justice, looking particularly into how LGBTIQ+³ communities are situated within the gender-climate nexus and climate justice movement. As a note, the acronym LGBTIQ+ was chosen as the term used primarily throughout the paper, although we acknowledge there are many variations which differ according to context. We acknowledge that the LGBTIQ+ acronym and similar variations have also been critiqued for privileging identity categories devised in the global North.⁴ This criticism highlights the importance of sensitivity and understanding of local, place-based identities. Even within the North American context for example, acronyms such as “LGBTQ2S” and “LGBTQQ” are often used, which integrate the term “Two-Spirit” in reference to indigenous persons who do not conform to the Euro-American gender binary.⁵ We also use the terms “queer”, “gender diverse” and “sexual and gender minorities” interchangeably throughout the paper.

Linking Gender and Climate Change

Within the linkages of climate change and gender, there has been increasing widespread awareness of differentiated climate impacts over the last decade. Yet this has been primarily framed along the binary of structural inequalities between men and women, who experience climate change differently due to socially constructed roles and responsibilities. The binary framework has had salience in drawing attention and prompting collective action around urgent issues of climate vulnerability for women and girls, particularly in the Global South. More significantly, this narrative framing has helped highlight the importance of women contributing to climate-related planning, policy-making and implementation; established the agenda of gender-responsive climate policies at international, national and local levels (i.e. bringing together the benefits of gender equality with environmental and socioeconomic benefits); and facilitated the formation of the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC), as one of the nine stakeholder groups to the UNFCCC, as well as global networks like GenderCC around gender-responsive climate policy.

¹ Schlosberg and Collins, 2014

² Global Carbon Project, 2021 cited in Popovich and Plumer, 2021

³ LGBTIQ+ refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, with the + including a range of people whose identities or practices are not included within those terms

⁴ (Dwyer et al., 2018, p. 2).

⁵ Vinyeta, Whyte and Lynn, 2015. p. 9

However, there are significant limitations to the work of climate justice should gender-responsive policies continue along a binary framework – namely, disregarding the overlap between gender inequality and the struggles of individuals and whole communities who identify as LGBTIQ+. Historical and ongoing patterns of stigma, violence, and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ communities result in social disparities that climate change, as a risk amplifier, further exacerbates. Rather than separate struggles, it should be understood that the viewpoints and experiences of women and LGBTIQ+ populations on climate change are parallel, given the correlation and mutual reinforcement of sexism and homophobia.⁶

An Intersectional Framework for the Gender-Climate Nexus

A more expansive analytical framework is required for the visibility of queer struggles and experiences of climate change to be further recognized and integrated in gender-responsive climate policy. Thus intersectionality, as an analytical tool developed within critical feminist theory – more specifically, Black feminist critique⁷ – is rising in recognition as the most appropriate lens within the gender-climate nexus. An intersectional approach, put in the simplest terms, is ‘asking the other question’.

“When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’
When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’
When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’⁸

While the empirical applicability and scalability of intersectionality is still in progress, there is growing consensus that taking an intersectional approach necessarily moves us out of focusing on gender as one single variable and into considering how gender inequality is intertwined with and even reinforced by other context-specific structures of domination.⁹ There is no understanding of gender without simultaneously understanding other social categorizations of race, ethnicity, class, age, (dis)ability, religion, and so forth. An intersectional theoretical framework thus characterizes the approach to the following sections on the impacts of climate change and climate policy for LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities, employing a place-based and context-specific analysis in a largely under-researched and underrepresented area of study ripe for further exploration.

Impacts of Climate Change to LGBTIQ+ Communities

Accounts from LGBTIQ+ Climate Justice Organizers

An important, first hand source of narration on the impacts of climate change to LGBTIQ+ communities comes from queer grassroots collectives and individuals in the climate justice movement who utilize the power of social media platforms (e.g. Instagram and Twitter) for mobilizing and story-telling. The vibrancy and leadership of queer activism in the climate movement today highlights new modes of organizing as well as the valuable knowledge and skills of LGBTIQ+ communities in advocacy and community-building, developed over personal and collective histories of resistance and mobilizing for human rights.¹⁰ Some organizations at this specific intersection based throughout North America and the UK include: [Our Climate Voices](#), [Out for Sustainability](#), [Queers x Climate](#) and [Queer Ecojustice Project](#).

These grassroots organizations and their founders, amid many other notable influential individuals have become key voices in illuminating the intersections of climate justice and how LGBTIQ+ communities, especially trans and

6 Phar 1988; Gaard, 2019, p. 95

7 Crenshaw, 1989

8 Matsuda 1991, p. 1189, cited in Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014, p. 420

9 Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014, p. 420–421

10 Gaard, 2019, p. 97

queer, low-income people of color are on the frontlines. An example of a powerful and collective statement can be read from an [article](#) written by Aletta Brady (founder of Our Climate Voices), Anthony Torres and Phillip Brown published in Grist, (see excerpt in [Figure 1](#)). European queer publication, Gay Times also recently released a [digital issue](#) centering the climate conversation. The cover story “No Pride, No Planet” written by multimedia journalist Diyora Shadijanova brings together perspectives from queer climate activists and relevant organisations, highlighting the important contributions of the LGBTIQ+ activism in the work of climate justice (see excerpt in [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 1:

Excerpt from “What the queer community brings to the fight for climate justice”, Grist (April 09, 2019)

As queer and trans climate justice advocates, our fight is deeply personal. Our communities, friends, and chosen families are particularly vulnerable as rapid changes in climate lead to more natural disasters, environmental instability, and scarcity. We also share an understanding of how queer wisdom is essential to creating a liveable future for all of us.

Trans and queer communities, especially black and brown and low-income queer and trans people, live on the frontlines of climate change. Many young queer and trans people do not have the resources or ability to flee verbal, emotional, and physical violence in their hometowns. Instead, around the world, they are often abandoned by family and forced onto the streets with little to no support to survive.

Consider that 40 percent of U.S. youth who experience homelessness identify as LGBTQ, even though they represent just 7 percent of the population. Moreover, Queer and trans people are concentrated in coastal cities such as Miami, New Orleans, New York and San Francisco at high risk for sea level rise and increasing storm surges. As the planet warms, more frequent and severe storms, wildfires, and floods will exacerbate these vulnerabilities, and our people will be among the first and worst hit.

Figure 2:

Excerpt from “No Planet, No Pride: Why climate justice is LGBTQ+ justice”, Gay Times, 21st March 2022

When it comes to survival skills, the LGBTQ+ community has much knowledge to offer because of our individual, as well as shared, histories of struggle, resistance, joy and hope. Today, countless grassroots organisations, many of whom are being led by queer activists, embody these beliefs and work hard to tackle climate issues of all scales. Just a few months ago, the #StopCambo campaign managed to halt the development of a huge oil field in the North Sea. The will for intersectional climate justice is already there, but it still desperately needs support of the masses.

As we hurtle towards a Sixth-Mass Extinction event, LGBTQ+ justice will play a key role within the climate justice movement. The more we link social injustices, the quicker we will get to living harmoniously on a thriving planet. If queerness is inherently political, so is climate justice.

Academic Literature

Unsurprisingly, existing research studies drawing explicit connections between LGBTIQ+ identity and climate are significantly limited. Although there are related studies of relevance that point to social determinants of health such as housing conditions, economic opportunities, and access to health care and how they can negatively and disproportionately affect the LGBTIQ+ population and reduce their capacity to respond to environmental harm.¹¹ For

¹¹ Goldsmith and Bell, 2021

example, there is evidence of higher rates of chronic physical and mental illnesses among LGBTQ+ populations.¹² This is further compounded by findings that members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to struggle to find healthcare options that meet their unique needs, making them more likely to postpone care or receive inadequate care.¹³ There is also a well-established body of evidence on the disparities between gay men and lesbian women and their heterosexual counterparts known as “the gay wage gap”.¹⁴ Data just released this year by the Bureau Labor of Statistics and by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation reveals ongoing disparities today, wherein LGBTQ+ workers earn about 90 cents for every dollar that the typical worker earns, with an even more disproportionate wage gap faced by LGBTQ+ people of color, transgender women and men and non-binary individuals compared to their white or cisgender LGBTQ+ peers.¹⁵

However, by far, the most prominent emerging field of study that clearly elucidates the effects of climate change on sexual and gender minorities are climate-related natural disasters and relief responses. The first comprehensive study on LGBTQ+ people and climate-related disasters looked at five transnational case studies: Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the tsunami in India in 2004, the eruption of Mount Merapi in Indonesia in 2010, and cyclone and heavy rain-related evacuations in the Philippines.¹⁶ The research emphasized the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ people to disasters because of discrimination and neglect in disaster-related laws and policies.¹⁷ The authors in this study also urgently emphasize the need for an intersectional lens to acknowledge the diversity of experiences within gender and sexual minorities in these disaster situations, stating that “LGBTI populations are not homogeneous and have different needs wrought by the competing intersections of socio-economic resources, gender, race/ethnicity, age and regional or national milieu”.¹⁸ Some other key studies that followed highlight the disparate experiences of non-binary genders including the Aravanis of India and the Warias of Indonesia,¹⁹ and argue critically that LGBTQ+ people should be regarded as “important community stakeholders for disaster management planning”, rather than merely as “vulnerable” groups.²⁰

Interview Findings

It is important to clarify that the purpose of these qualitative interviews was not to draw broad generalizations on how climate change affects individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. Rather, our analysis of the individual responses further illustrates the diversity of experiences from the myriad intersections represented within each person, and highlights the centrality of place-based identity. However, a clear common thread was apparent in how each of these selected individuals, engaged in queer politics, confront climate change by recognizing that it requires “challenging the systems of oppression that exploit the earth and most human communities.”²¹ The participants, who all identified as queer, were affiliated with the GenderCC network, and involved in the work of climate justice with civil society organizations or through local political organizing in different parts of the world. Each interviewee recognized the significance of their geographical setting and unique aspects in their positionality coloring their queer identity, and therefore spoke from their own interpretive experiences of climate change and its impacts on their communities.

The first participant identified as a lesbian and described herself further as a “Black, indigenous woman” and gardener with a generations-long, ancestral connection to her land, just outside of Cape Town. Her experience of climate change and its impacts were mostly indirect, limited to observation of phenomena, such as fewer rains and how this affects her plants. She was asked how she has experienced or observed any unique phenomena as a

12 *ibid*, p. 80

13 Chávez 2011, cited in Vinyeta et al., 2015, p. 21

14 Badgett, 1995 and 2001; Clain and Leppel, 2001; Allegretto and Arthur, 2001; Blandford, 2003; Carpenter, 2005 and 2007; Elmslie and Tebaldi, 2007; and Zavodny, 2008

15 Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2022

16 Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon, 2014

17 Goldsmith, 2021, p. 2

18 Dominey-Howes, et al., 2014, p. 905

19 Gaillard et al., 2017; Larkin, 2019, as cited in Goldsmith, 2021, p. 3

20 Wisner et al., 2017, as cited in *ibid*

21 Gaard, 2019, p. 98

result of climate change in her local context, to which she responded: "Climate change affects the poor more than the rich, women more than men. Queer people suffer most from being unnoticed. You are always having to negotiate queer... do I come out, do I not come out? Do you know about me? Should I tell you about me?"

The second participant also identified as a lesbian, although did not consider any other aspects as notable intersections in her identity, as person from a "white, rather privileged background". Located in Berlin, she acknowledged that her local queer communities are provided with extensive rights and social safety and that there are little to no notable impacts felt by the changing climate yet in Germany, as compared with other geographical settings. In response to a question asking for her understanding of the basic concepts and core linkages around gender and climate change, she responded: "From my understanding, queer people, who are marginalized and structurally disadvantaged are less resilient in coping with the big, overwhelming issues of climate change. Particularly as they are more likely to experience psychological issues because of these structural disadvantages."

The final participant identified as gender non-conforming and described themselves as "a young iTaukei" (the major indigenous people of Fiji) and "a feminist". Located in Suva, Fiji, they have long observed the effects of climate change through ocean acidification and sea level rise throughout their lifetime in the island-country's most urban setting. However their personal experiences of climate change and understanding its "direct impacts on bodies", particularly for sexual and gender minorities in the Pacific, developed alongside their work with civil society, going out to rural communities who have experienced the worst effects of climate-related disasters through recent and ongoing cyclone activity. To the same question on the basic concepts and core linkages around gender and climate change, they responded: "We cannot talk about climate justice without talking about gender justice, or without talking about rates of violence in the Pacific. You cannot talk about climate justice without talking about sexuality, gender expression, and policies on these fronts, because these issues are happening now, during climate disasters. I see it as a web that interlinks together all these sets of issues."

Potential Impacts of Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Policies to LGBTIQ+ Communities

Intersectionality in Designing Climate Policies

Along with the differentiated direct impacts of climate change, more recent studies are shedding light on how policy solutions can also have indirect impacts in reproducing social inequalities.²² This comes alongside the emergence of the concept of 'just transition' emphasizing the need for considerations of equity in the transition to a low carbon economy. In designing policies to mitigate carbon emissions and adapt to climate impacts, these studies stress the importance of considering their effects on disaggregated social groups, with the aim of maximizing the benefits and minimizing the negative effects of these policies. As with understanding the complexities of climate change impacts, policymakers need to follow the throughline of intersectionality in its solutions, using "a multi-level approach to model equities at the intersection of multiple social identities".²³ In other words, to avoid negative social and distributional outcomes, they ought to examine who climate action policies are for – who it benefits and who it excludes – and take an inclusive, participatory, pro-poor and strategic pathway in their design and implementation.²⁴

The politics of urban planning and policy is a particularly salient area for examining the potential impacts of climate policies on LGBTIQ+ communities. Today, 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050 (UN DESA, 2018). It is also estimated that cities account for 75% of global CO₂ emissions (UNEP, 2022), placing the onus on city planners and governments to mitigate climate breakdown and deliver health and economic benefits while tackling systemic issues of inequality. As a result, climate action policies have become increasingly interlinked with the politics and practices in urban planning and policy.

22 Alber et al., 2017; Brugnach et al., 2017; Klinsky & Winkler, 2018; Ramos-Castillo et al., 2017

23 Lotfata and Munenzon, 2022, p. 1

24 Markkannen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019, p. 837

Queer Space: The Case of LGBTQ Youth of Color in New York City's West Village

Historically speaking, urban planning is “shaped by those in power, and does not readily expand to include other minority groups without sustained pressure from specific interest groups”.²⁵ The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ communities in planning discourse, and even for the basic recognition that they are affected by planning decisions, is an unfinished struggle. The history and ongoing story of the West Village as a “site of urban regeneration and contestation”²⁶ is a prominent example of a gay village or ‘gayborhood’ that reflects this unfinished struggle and the dynamic intersections of race and class within it.

In their study on “LGBTQ youth of color (YOC)” in the West Village published in 2016, authors Irazabal and Huerta describe the neighborhood as “a place caught up in tensions between a queer-friendly and post-queer neighbourhood”.²⁷ As the historical legacy of West Village as the birthplace of the Gay Rights movement becomes increasingly commodified and the district more commercialized, tourism and gentrification transform the community and housing prices threaten to displace Black and Brown LGBTIQ+ youth living there seeking shelter and safety from marginalization.²⁸

Today, as climate mitigation and adaptation becomes an increasingly ubiquitous element of urban policy,²⁹ such issues of housing injustice and insecurity could become further compounded, producing adverse effects for queer communities who are marginalized across intersections of race and class. Additionally, the risk for adverse effects of climate mitigation increases in contexts where there are high levels of existing inequalities.³⁰ While there is no measure, Irazabal and Huerta argue that existing inequalities still characterizes cities like New York, where “queer-phobic discrimination is still prevalent” and “where LGBTQ YOC are more disparagingly marginalized than their White counterparts”.³¹

Eco-Gentrification to Carbon Gentrification

The term ‘eco-gentrification’ can be used to describe the phenomenon where environmental improvements cause the displacement of lower-income and often Black and Brown residents, by higher-income, typically white ones.³² Whereas previous literature focused on traditional ‘green’ urban environmental interventions such as parks, gardens and green spaces, authors Rice et al. build on this by extending the focus to a new and coherent set of ‘gray’ interventions that characterize today’s ‘climate-friendly’ and ‘low-carbon’ neighborhood, such as alternative transit, mixed-use density and energy efficiency efforts.³³ They conceptualize this trend as a type of carbon gentrification, arguing that as a low-carbon lifestyle becomes more desirable for middle and upper-income urban residents, who are choosing to live near public transit and in higher-density mixed-use areas, there are increased concerns around housing justice and displacement for existing lower-income residents.³⁴

The threat of carbon gentrification for low-income residents in urban neighborhoods also highlights the significance of strong local community organizing and advocacy groups, particularly for queer communities. In New York City, this is embodied in organizing groups like FIERCE, made up of LGBTQ YOC who formed together in 2000 in response to issues of safety and displacement, and have since helped secure city resources to address the needs of thousands of homeless and low-income LGBTQ YOC in New York City.³⁵

25 Doan, 2011, p. 7

26 Goh, 2018, p. 468

27 p. 716

28 ibid

29 Rice et. al., 2019, p. 147

30 Markkannen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019, p. 837

31 2016, p. 715

32 Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009; Checker, 2011, cited in Rice et al., 2019, p. 147

33 2019, p. 148

34 ibid, p. 150

35 Irazabal and Huerta, 2016, p. 720

Conclusion

There are parallel connections between groups like FIERCE and queer grassroots organizers on the frontlines of the climate justice movement who advocate for the needs of their communities, for recognition and for the right to live where they choose (i.e. on a safe and habitable planet). The struggles and experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities who are dealing with the present impacts of climate change are material and far-reaching, as previewed through studies and stories on the frontlines of climate disaster and relief. Without the participation of sexually and gender diverse individuals in climate decision-making bodies, both inclusive of and alongside women, the goals of gender-responsive climate policies cannot be fully realized.

An intersectional approach is necessary, not only for understanding the differentiated impacts of climate change, but in designing and implementing inclusive policies to mitigate emissions and adapt to its impacts. The phenomenon of eco-gentrification extended to a newer distinct form of carbon gentrification, could be a potential adverse impact of climate mitigation and adaptation policy for queer communities – particularly low-income people of color. As climate action policies become increasingly interlinked with the politics and practices of urban planning and policy, the unfinished struggle for LGBTIQ+ inclusion in city spaces becomes all the more urgent. The social divides illustrated in this scenario gets to the core of the issues at stake of ‘asking the other question’ – who benefits and who is excluded from the benefits of climate solutions? Whose experience of climate impacts is prioritized and whose is sidelined? An intersectional approach that foregrounds climate impacts on LGBTIQ+ communities, especially queer people of color, and includes them into ongoing climate conversations at the highest levels, is still in progress. No doubt in its early stages, but nonetheless on its way.

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