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Climate Change and Migration: The Intersection of Climate Change, Migration, and Gender through Policy

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Abstract

This article explores the intersectional nature of the issue of climate change, especially as it relates to migration. Both migration and climate change are issues of global significance, with benefits and burdens distributed unevenly across gender, racial, and class lines. This intersectional approach takes note of the unequal power structures at play when attempting to combat these issues with policy.

Keywords

Intersectionality, Gender, Climate Change

Disciplines

Environmental Sciences | Environmental Studies | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Migration Studies

Comments

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Research Paper

Climate Change and Migration:

The Intersection of Climate Change, Migration, and Gender, Through Policy

Climate change, like migration, is an issue with deeply intersectional implications. They are two global issues that are inextricably linked to each other. According to the International Organization for Migration, “estimates have suggested that between 25 million to one billion people could be displaced by climate change over the next 40 years” (IOM 9). Not only do they contribute to one another, but they also demonstrate the way that global issues are intersectional in nature and must be dealt with as such. After examining the way that climate change policy is approached, it is clear that it is reflective of the unequal distribution of burdens and benefits in the modern world. The global north not only contributes to the problem, but controls the way it’s dealt with in ways that only serve to reinforce these unequal power structures.

Climate change is a problem that will impact the entire world, and very much influence the migration of people. The gradual warming of our climate will result in many adverse effects, including the melting of the polar ice caps which will result in a rise in sea levels, a change in the makeup of biological landscapes, and an increase in extreme weather events like hurricanes, droughts, and floods (IOM). Extreme weather can cause immediate migratory responses. According to the IOM, “the number of natural disasters has more than doubled over the last two decades, and more than 20 million people were displaced by sudden-onset climate-related natural

disasters in 2008” (9). When these types of disasters occur, it is often imperative that people evacuate, creating a situation in which migration is forced. Climate change is set to change the landscape of the earth as we know it. This has far reaching implications for all humans, as we are connected to the land we occupy. For some humans, land means more than just a place to occupy. Many people derive their entire livelihoods from the land in which they live. The global average temperature is predicted to rise between 2 and 5 degrees centigrade (IOM), which has the power to actively reshape the geographical features of the world. For those who rely on the land for their food, income, and sustenance, a changing landscape could force them into migration to seek a way to adapt their lives (Dun and Gemenne 10).

Both migration and climate change must be examined through an intersectional lens because they impact the world’s most vulnerable populations. The concept of intersectionality is essential to the study of feminism. The term refers to the way that multiple oppressions can interlock and impact a person or group in multiple ways at once. The concept, as emphasized by Kaijser and Kronsell, “serves to shed light on how structures of power emerge and interact” (418). Examining intersectional oppressions is helpful to understanding the extent to which certain groups are marginalized. An intersectional approach considers the many different oppressions that exist in the world and instead of distinguishing between them, analyzes how they may all be working in a combined way to oppress people and populations. In order to analyze the world in terms of human rights, an intersectional approach that considers race and class is necessary. Within feminist studies, gender is always an aspect that is examined. Considerations of race, class, and gender are of the utmost importance for intersectional studies.

When examining both climate change and migration, some of the most important considerations include gender, class, and race. Issues impact different populations differently,

and often it is the most vulnerable who are left to deal with the consequences. Climate change in particular, because it is a worldwide issue, reflects the class and gender inequalities present in the global order. Climate change is an issue that impacts those who are least equipped to adapt to it. Those are the people that depend the most on the land as it is now. An intersectional examination leads us to see how, globally, women in poor areas are often the most vulnerable, as “it is widely accepted that women in developing countries constitute one of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in society” (Denton 11). While hard empirical data that distinguishes climate impacts between the genders and classes is not readily available, there are many qualitative examinations of the way climate change disproportionately targets those who are marginalized. Climate change research is dominated by those in positions of power, so it is significant that the following research distinguished the adverse effects of climate change on marginalized groups. Lisa Bendlin, in her intersectional examination of climate change impacts, identifies a variety of ways that climate change impacts women disproportionately in comparison to men. Rural poor women who exist at the intersection of gender and class marginalization face many challenges because of climate change. Both extreme weather and changing conditions can make it more dangerous for women to do the work that are traditionally responsible for. For example, women who traditionally play the role of provision-gathering may need to walk longer distances, putting them in harm's way (Bendlin 686). Water-gathering women specifically face the increasing risk of malaria. Women that are traditionally responsible for cooking meals may face difficulties with food shortages and the changing availability of traditional foods, thus contributing to hunger issues (Denton 14). Specific health concerns that only apply to women can become more severe with climate change. Floods, droughts, and hurricanes limit access to medical care, which can be detrimental to pregnant women (Bendlin 686). All of these examples

show the ways that climate change would impact women specifically. All of these impacts are rooted in the inherently unequal distribution of power between genders, and emphasized by the additional oppression of class. In her analysis, Fatma Denton came to the conclusion that “Unequal power relations between women and men lead to their differential access to environmental resources and opportunities for income diversification, entailing that environmental vulnerability, and indeed security, affect women and men differently” (16). She goes further to make the connection between migration and gender by stating, “The increasing movement of male migrants to 'greener pastures' has tended to compound the poverty that many rural women have to contend with” (16). Not only do the unfair power structures shape the way the issue impacts people, but also the way people have to adapt. The power structures are at play at each level.

Even when not examined in a global context, climate change impacts still have intersectional effects. Speaking entirely in regards to the United States’ response to Hurricane Katrina, Joan Nagel notes that, “Poverty combines with race and ideologies about gender to produce a metric of deep disadvantage in terms of mobility” (469). In the case of Katrina, an extreme weather event, the burdens were distributed unevenly along racial and class lines. The most disadvantaged groups in the area hit hardest were also those who suffered the greatest consequences.

It is important to, in such a global context, distinguish between the “global south” and the “global north”. The distinction refers to the wealth and development differences between the “more developed” nations of the global north, and the “less developed” nations of the global south. This is an important distinction to make because climate change is an issue that was

largely created by the global north, but negatively impacts the global south. As Joan Nagel explains, this is incredibly unfair because,

Rich countries will have more resources to adapt to the impacts of climate change by designing barriers to storm surges, refitting buildings and coastal facilities, or rebuilding away from coastlines. Poor countries, especially island nations whose land and fresh water supplies are vulnerable to sea level rise, will have to rely on others in the global system to provide them with resources to adapt or migrate. (470)

This is significant because those in the global north often fail to account for the consequences of their actions. As Nagel emphasizes, those in poorer countries will have to “adapt or migrate,” which often moves the issue outside the realm of just poor countries, and starts to impact the world as a whole. Without a comprehensive analysis of the intersectional nature of the issue, the global north can go on contributing to problems and not understanding the full extent of the potential consequences. It is essential to note that the issues impact regions and groups differently, and therefore solutions must take this into consideration.

The significance of intersectionality is reflected in the policy solutions to both of these issues. Policy analysis is an important tool for examining solutions to problems. However, policy can be very tricky as it often times contributes to existing power structures and reinforces negative constructions of already marginalized groups. As Schneider and Ingram note, “there are strong pressures for public officials to provide beneficial policy to powerful, positively constructed target populations and to devise punitive, punishment-oriented policy for negatively constructed groups” (334). For this reason, policy is often reflective of the needs of those in powerful positions. Climate change policy is no different, almost directly mirroring the interlocking oppressions that make climate change worse for those in marginalized positions. Climate change policymaking is dominated by men, “when it comes to international climate policy content, gender aspects are marginalised. The United Nations Framework Convention on

Climate Change (UNFCCC), adopted in 1992, completely lacks a gender perspective” (Kaijser & Kronsell 427). Climate change policy, like migration policy, often fails to consider the needs of those at the bottom. When groups are left out of policy, it immediately becomes more difficult for those groups to find solutions. Climate change policy is dominated by nations of the global north, who hold more international policymaking capacities because of their wealth and influence. The intersection of class and policymaking also have “gendered implications,” as explained by Fatma Denton, “If poorer nations are finding it difficult to get richer nations to meet their obligations and work towards climate mitigation, poor women have an even bigger problem in promoting their agenda” (Denton 16). The class dominated sphere of global policymaking is inextricably linked to gender, demonstrating further how intersectional this issue is.

In conclusion, climate change is an issue with vast intersectional implications. Climate change directly influences migration. The two global issues have different impacts on different groups, based on their social construction and the power structures at play in the world. Those who are marginalized in society face the greatest consequences of both climate change and migration.

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