

Climate Change and Paying Lipservice to Women: What is the Role and Representation of Gender in the COP21 Negotiations?

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ABSTRACT

The gathering of global leaders to discuss climate change, known as COP21, in Paris in 2015 has been trumpeted as a success due to the high number of countries that have positively participated. COP21, or the Conference of Parties, is the governing body for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), an environmental treaty aiming to tackle the problems associated with greenhouse gases. However, there are post-COP21 reports suggesting that despite 123 out of 195 countries so far agreeing to a set of policies to curb climate change, many important elements of the conference were not given the platform promised to them, including gender issues. Indeed, there are significant voices that say gender was strategically marginalised. Yet, prior to Paris in 2015, the COP21 president, French foreign affairs minister Laurent Fabius, claimed gender would be central to the negotiations. This was an acknowledgement that the impacts of climate change are overall more disadvantageous to women and girls. The purpose of the research is to examine the scope and importance of gender in the negotiations through a review of documentation and qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles.

1. Introduction

The Conference of Parties, or COP sessions, are the international political response to climate change. The sessions started at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where the 'Rio Convention' included the adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This convention set out a framework for action to curb the acceleration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, a major cause of climate change. The UNFCCC entered into force on 21 March 1994, and now has a membership of 195 countries, or parties as they are known at the COP gatherings. At each session policy regarding the sources of GHGs, including fossil fuels, are discussed and adopted. The UNFCCC claimed that COP21 was a historic agreement, and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed it a resounding success (UNFCCC, 2015). However, there have been many female voices challenging its claims, especially in the area of women's rights, and their inclusion in climate change policy and strategy (Bowser, 2015). Despite calls by academics for more research exploring gender and climate change (Alston, 2014) (MacGregor, 2009), at the time of writing there are no academic papers examining COP21 through a gender lens, and just one NGO report reviewing how gender was represented during the negotiations (Huyer, 2016). In the absence of academic research, I will conduct a review of documentation and official reports. Therefore, I will examine newspaper reports from COP21 as these dispatches arguably give insight, through a content analysis, into the delegate's levels of commitment to gender-related climate change issues. While newspaper

articles do not completely 'mirror' events as they are a product from a journalist that is subject to various influences that need to be taken into account, they do offer an understanding of larger society (Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014, p. 9). This study intends to explore COP21 from a feminist perspective, especially in consideration of the fact that Laurent Fabius, the French foreign affairs minister and head of the conference in Paris 2015, drew attention to the gender imbalance of climate change prior to the negotiations in an interview with the French radio station RFI: "Women must be placed at the heart of national and local climate strategies and at the heart of international climate negotiations. As the future president of COP21 in Paris, I will ensure this. The climate battle must be fought for, and with, women." (Fabius, 2015). Yet, such issues received little attention during the negotiations, evidenced in what can be described as minimal references to gender in the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) daily reports. A review of the IISD daily roundups of COP21 reveals that gender is discussed only four times over the 10 days. Within this paper I explore the theories that contribute to the understanding of the issues surrounding gender-specific climate change problems, including the system of patriarchy, as defined by feminists, that presents barriers to decision-making and policy formation. It is important to note here that while there were talks on gender, and the hosting of a Gender Day, this study draws a difference between these events and the

inclusion of women's issues in the actual negotiations, as it is the final text of the Paris Agreement that will decide the actions of those countries that adopt it.

1.1 Background to gender and climate change impacts

Fabius' claims that women are disproportionately impacted by climate change are in line with reports from a number of organisations concerned with the problems associated with a warming planet, including the World Health Organisation, among others. A 2015 WHO report states that many of the health risks that are likely to be affected by ongoing climate change show gender differentials. It adds that globally, disasters such as droughts, floods and storms kill more women than men, and tend to kill women at a younger age. WHO also claims that gender-gaps have effects on life expectancy, and tend to be greater in more severe disasters, and in places where the socioeconomic status of women is particularly low (World Health Organisation, 2015). These increased disadvantages of climate change extend to the issue of women's control over their bodies and reproductive rights. Reports have shown that climate change can impact upon women's personal safety. This can range from increased likelihood of rape and attack during, and following, a disaster, as reported in New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina (Thornton & Voigt, 2007), to the migration of women from rural areas leading to exposure to sexual exploitation through prostitution (Kyle & Koslowski, 2011). Population control is often cited as a means by which to mitigate climate change, and this has resulted in women in developing countries increasingly being denied decisions over their reproductive choices (Guillebaud, 2007). Not only does this have social and health impacts, it has been argued that population control diverts attention away from the real issue of over-consumption by the global south (Gaard, 2015). A 2006 review of the link between family planning in developing countries and environmental mitigation showed that there was little evidence of population control having a major impact upon reducing greenhouse gases, and that, especially in the cases of rural communities where family planning was linked to biodiversity goals, it led to women being coerced into accepting inadequate methods (Oldham, 2006).

1.2 Background to the influence of media reporting on climate change

Research shows that women are under-represented not just in policy formulation, but also in the media discourse on climate change issues, with the majority of journalists still treating the problem as one that affects men and women equally (Sarwono, Ali, & Eide, 2012). Where gen-

der perspectives are reported upon, there is evidence to suggest that women are portrayed as either vulnerable and incapable of determining their own solutions, or as the saviours of the planet, placing the burden of climate change prevention and mitigation upon their shoulders, often without the resources to carry out such tasks (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). The consequences of such journalism (relegating women to a 'niche' subject, and then assigning them distinct, and powerless, roles) upon how the public perceive gender and climate change cannot be underestimated. Boykoff, McNatt, and Goodman (2015) have pointed out that the general public do not read peer-reviewed papers on climate change, but instead absorb such information from the mass media. A recent analysis of international media coverage of climate change from 2003 to 2013 revealed that skeptical reports were much higher in the United States and UK, which resulted in unusually high levels of skepticism in respondents in those countries as opposed to other nations (Capstick, Whitmarsh, Poortinga, Pidgeon, & Upham, 2014). Furthermore, a study of Japanese media showed that an increased coverage of climate change on the front pages of its national newspapers, correlated with an increase in environmental concerns among the population (Sampei & Aoyagi-Utsui, 2009).

2. The Role of Eco-feminism

The main body of work associated with gender and environmental issues is from the eco-feminist perspective, a movement that explores the links between women and environmental change, which gained traction at the start of the 1980s. The 1979 book *Women and Nature*, by feminist writer Susan Griffin, is widely cited as influencing the development of eco-feminism (e.g. Spretnak, 1990). However, the movement, and academic interest, saw a decline in the 1990s due to it being viewed as 'spiritualist' and 'fluffy' and did not tackle the practical aspects of gender-specific climate problems (MacGregor, 2009). The publication of the 1991 book titled *Rethinking Eco feminist Politics* by Janet Biehl, also questioned the practicality of the movement. In the book, Biehl is particularly critical of the early eco-feminist movement's claims that women hold the exclusive role of developing caring and nurturing relationships with nature, with the implication that biology dictates an understanding of environmental issues, and creates concern for them (Biehl, 1991). Subsequently feminists such as Cecilia Jackson have treated eco-feminism with suspicion, accusing the movement of being 'essentialist', and the momentum of the group stalled, along with the development of theories and ideas associated with it, further limiting research on women and climate change (Gaard, 2011).

2.1 The Role of the Media

Newspapers have historically tailored news to suit readerships (Conboy & Steel, 2008). However, it has been suggested that contemporary reporting has downgraded its ability to question sources of information due to a lack of resources and expert knowledge (Conboy, et al. 1998). This suggests that newspaper content reflects not independent evaluation or even political bias by the reporters, but a mere repeating of information supplied by various official sources. Despite an extensive search through scholarly articles, there is little research on how gender and its relationship to climate change is discussed in the media. The main body of research into newspaper coverage of climate change is by Max Boykoff, an associate professor in the Center for Science and Technology Policy at Colorado University. Boykoff has not been concerned with the reporting of gender issues and climate change, which is disappointing but possibly to be expected given the gender bias within newspaper structures. The 2016 publication *Media Meets Climate: The Global Challenge for Journalism* (edited by Elisabeth Eide & Risto Kunelius) includes a study of how newspapers report upon climate change in relation to women. The chapter, *Ignored Voices. The Victims, The Virtuous, The Agents Women and Climate Change Coverage*, written by Billy Sarwono, Zarqa S. Ali & Elisabeth Eide finds that while the number of women journalists has increased, this does not guarantee that news coverage will become free of gender bias. Eide describes gender bias as the view of women, and the values and beliefs that they hold as members of the community, as being presented through the lens of a male dominated culture. Women then in turn absorb this, making it difficult to change the values that have been deemed acceptable by the society. Eide continues to argue that because of this, people follow deeply rooted traditions, even though some of these have negative impact on whole societies. With the added pressure of resource cuts and deadlines, journalists focus on the immediate work at hand rather than developing gender sensitive reporting (Sarwono et al., 2012, p. 291).

3. Methodology

The methodology selected for the research is qualitative content analysis. The reason for doing so is that qualitative research is a strategy that places an emphasis on words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012). It is also a method that is suitable for research where there is a limited amount of data (Bryman, 2012) as opposed to a quantitative method. The COP 21 conference took place in 2015 from November 30 to December 11, with a short timeframe of interest prior

and post the event and even less interest in the subject of gender. Therefore, with 11 articles available, the content of the articles, rather than quantity, is of more importance to the goal of the research.

3.1 Review of COP 21 documentation

I examined the draft and final text of the Paris Agreement in order to establish the level of commitment to gender issues in the COP21 negotiations. Clearly if gender was important to COP21, then it would play the central role that president of COP 21 Laurent Fabius claimed it would in statements to the media in the run-up to the conference. Yet, there is a suggestion significant action on gender issues did not translate into the final Paris Agreement. While climate negotiations have been taking place for over 20 years, COP21 was held up as a significant event within that timeframe as for the first time both poor and wealthy nations agreed to reduce emissions. It has been claimed that previous UN climate change conferences followed a top-down approach, instead of bottom-up, and some attendees were unsatisfied with the terms and conditions. This greater involvement of developing countries in COP21 is to be applauded, but from a gender perspective many activists have also attributed this to the lack of willingness for greater representation of women in the agreement, especially as in many countries, such as India and Mexico, the agreement needs to have the consent of a male dominated parliament before it can be ratified. Therefore, one could argue that the function of gender within the COP21 negotiations is that of a trading card, a means by which the UNFCCC can bargain with countries in order to secure their commitment to the overall Paris Agreement. According to a draft text of what could potentially have been included in the Paris Agreement, released by the UNFCCC in July 2015 in a paper entitled *Scenario Note on the tenth part of the second session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action*, Note by the Co-Chairs, there were at least six paragraphs in the main body of text that signaled a greater involvement of gender, yet never made it into the final document. The final Paris Agreement has only three mentions of gender. The distance between the UNFCCC's intention and actual application by countries involved in the negotiations can be measured in the submissions for the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs). In preparation for COP 21, countries (or parties as they are referred to in UNFCCC text) agreed to publicly explain in the form of documentation what post-2020 climate actions they intend to take under a new international agreement – the INDCs. A review by the organization Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS), of the INDCs submitted by

160 Parties indicates that attention to gender and other social issues is less than might be expected. According to CCAFS, gender receives attention from less than half the parties, 57 in total, none of whom are industrialised countries. Gender references are confined mostly to impacts of climate change on women, and women as “vulnerable populations”, with less emphasis on supporting women to actively address and participate in adaptation and mitigation actions. (Huyer, 2016). References to gender in areas where women play a substantial role – water, agriculture, environmental and natural resource management, energy, and health – are extremely low. Despite the high recognition of the importance of agriculture by almost all parties (131), only 10 parties mention the role of women in agriculture and food security, with very few references also made to women and gender in relation to water (4 parties), energy (6 parties), and health (6 parties). Only 20 parties make references to the integration of gender into national climate change policy and strategy. Three countries make reference to Gender and Climate Change Action Plans: Jordan, Liberia and Peru (Huyer, 2016).

3.2 Newspaper Data Collection

An archival search for newspaper reports on COP 21 was conducted through LexisNexis database accessed through VU University library. I also searched for articles through the search engines of the news websites for the New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Telegraph and The Times. In total, I reviewed 11 newspaper articles.

4. Results

4.1 Vulnerability/Virtue

The word ‘vulnerable’ was used at least once in each of the articles, and overall appeared 15 times. This corresponded with data from the 2011 paper *Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change*, in which the author Arora-Jonsson claims that in the limited literature at the time of writing on women and climate change two themes dominated, that of vulnerability, and virtue. Words associated with vulnerability were actually used infrequently, ‘victims’ only five times and ‘weak’ used only once throughout the data set. However, these words were often used in relation to women’s position in the pecking order of demographic groups experiencing disadvantageous conditions caused by climate change. In the article printed in the Qatar Tribune entitled *Taking Climate Action for, and with, Women* (8/03/2015) president of COP 21 Laurent Fabius claims that women are the “primary victims of climate change.” The Gulf Times article, *From*

the front lines of climate change (08/05/2016) states that: “And it will be the most vulnerable people – rural women, the sick, the old and the very young – who are most at risk.” The Indian News International in an article titled *Women Empowerment Stressed* (23/02/2016) quoted Major General Asghar Nawaz, chairman of the National Disaster Management Authority, as saying that “Women are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters and climate change”. In terms of references to virtue, this translates into a repeated portrayal of woman as selfless in their efforts to fight climate change. In the Singapore Straits profile of Christiana Figueres, UN climate chief close to finish line; *Paris talks will seal global pact she has worked towards for years* (date), it is mentioned ten times how hard she works with sentences such as “Through it all, Ms Figueres has kept up a punishing schedule.” And “one of the hardest-working people”. Words used in conjunction with her carrying out her role include drive, tirelessly, and marathon effort. In *The Guardian’s Women and climate change justice: thoughts from the Paris talks* (10/12/2015) the poet Filipino-American Isabella Avila Borgeson describes how she travelled to the Philippines post Typhoon Haiyan “I meant to stay for three months to help the community, and I stayed for over a year.” The other means of conveying the virtuousness of women in relation to climate change is their role in preventing and mitigating the impacts of a warming planet. In *The Qatar article Fabius talks of how “women are also often the main source of solutions”* and that “a program designed without taking women into account is less effective than the same programme planned with them.”.

4.2 Leadership

Another distinct theme that comes through is that of leadership, and moreover how women make better leaders than men but are prevented from attaining these positions through patriarchy. In the New York Times’ article *A Parade of Clichés* (12/12/2015), the writer comments on how there are a lot of men, as opposed to a few women, giving speeches at the Cop 21 conference but that they “became increasingly predictable, even formulaic” and then quotes the American activist Rebecca Solnit, who popularized the term ‘mansplaining’ as saying the collective speeches did not amount to much: “What makes me crazy is that Obama and Putin are talking about 2005 levels, and the European Union is talking about 1990 levels... it’s like gaining 100 pounds and then boasting that you’re losing 50”. The whole tone of the article is that the male leaders are ineffective, and although they are making speeches, the words amount to very little. In *The Herald article, Climate Change Debate Must Transcend ‘Fine Dining’* (13/06/2016) the writer

Ruth Butaumocho also raises the issue of a lack of women's leadership where it would potentially make a difference: "It boggles the mind that women's involvement in debate around climate change has remained peripheral, especially on policy issues, when they should be at the forefront in advocating for what works for them and deciding how they want policies formulated."

4.3 Access to power

Although the actual word 'power' is used only five times in the data set, there are many references to women's inability to direct or influence behavior to their benefit. Former Irish president, and now climate campaigner, Mary Robinson comments in *The Guardian* article *Cop21 is too male dominated and has male priorities* (08/12/2015) that some women had been excluded from the talks after being denied official passes to gain entry into the high security compound. There are also references to exclusion from legitimate power or 'positional' power, essentially an inability to access officialdom. In the *New York Times* article *A Parade of Clichés* (30/11/2015), there are two references to the dominance of men and the lack of women involved with the conference, "But there were certainly a lot of men", and "The few female speakers". In *The Guardian's* *Women and climate change justice: thoughts from the Paris talks* (10/12/2015) Tarja Halonen, the former president of Finland, states that women are "under-represented and underestimated" in relation to climate change. Helen Hakena, director of Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency, speaks of working with women in the Cartaret Islands, that are "tired of waiting for the government's relocation programme". Unable to influence the official sources, they leave the sinking islands and are caught in a cycle of poverty and spousal abuse. In the same article there are also examples of where women cannot access 'reward' power, in the form of post-disaster or prevention projects, especially if they are based on construction jobs, as outlined by the poet Isabella Avila Borgeson who describes how after the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines many of the livelihood projects left women that had lost husbands out of the reconstruction conversations. Winnie Byanyima says: "Only a trickle of governmental money reaches the household and when it gets there it may be taken by the head of the household." This lack of access to economic power, and associated ability to make decisions, because it is either withheld by government agents or husbands is again raised in the article. Usha Nair, from the All India Women's Conference, speaks of "the man might have a final say in the house", while Victoria Tauli-Corpuz adds that indigenous people have "Some anti-women traditions, like inheritance laws or male governance systems." One of

the strongest voices claiming a lack of gender inclusiveness at COP21 is Mary Robinson. Not only is she the protagonist in *The Guardian* article *Cop21 is too male dominated and has male priorities* (08/12/2015) she also alleges that some countries are trying to further weaken the position of women in the Paris Agreement through opposition to inclusion in the text. "Some countries are understood to be opposed to including language on gender equality in the text, including middle eastern countries." This is an accusation she repeats in *The Guardian's* piece *Women and climate change justice: thoughts from the Paris talks* (10/12/2015), "Some countries seem to want a narrow environmental agenda, like Norway. We need to keep gender in the text, as it's necessary for good climate policy."

5. Discussion

The research sought to examine what the role and representation of gender was within the COP21 negotiations, in order to understand the implications for future female involvement in climate change policy formulation. The available literature and data supports the view that while gender was talked about as a priority prior to COP21, during the negotiations and in the final agreement it was relegated to a niche issue. This fits with the on-going eco-feminist argument that male-dominated institutions, even when they claim to want to include female perspectives, are too entrenched in patriarchal systems and culture to respond to gender needs (Gaard, 2015). Throughout this research process, both in the literature review and in the analysing of the data, there has been the recurring theme of women's unequal access to power, which in turn has resulted in a limited role within the shaping of climate change policies whether on a local or international stage. While there is a high level of acknowledgment within the UNFCCC that climate change is more disadvantageous for women, as evidenced in draft text for the Paris Agreement, and numerous reports and text undertaken at previous COP gatherings, movement to act on this issue is slow. As Alston (2014) points out, policy that does not take into account a gender perspective can actually continue the cycle of gender inequality, and there are several examples of this taking place given in the newspaper articles, including the account by Isabella Avila Borgeson in the *Guardian* article *Women and climate change justice: thoughts from the Paris talks* (10/12/2015) where she states that post-relief construction policy following the Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 was centred around men, which left women who had been widowed by the disaster out of the conversations on how their homes should be re-built. Therefore, when one asks the question, What is the role and representation of gender in the COP21 climate negotiations?

one must take into account the disparity between the impassioned promises and the reality of what was delivered, which amounted to very little (Huyer, 2016). It is the climate justice campaigner Mary Robinson who offers one answer to the question when she speaks of the opposition from countries to the inclusion of gender in the final text. She further spells it out in an interview with the news website Democracy Now when she draws attention to the “negotiations going on”, and with her admission that gender was a potential bargaining chip. There is certainly room to suggest that gender, along with human and indigenous people’s rights, was used as a form of trade-off in order for the UNFCCC committee to secure the agreement of countries such as Saudi Arabia. However, the themes that have emerged from the data point to a wider role of gender than just as a negotiation strategy, and that is of a smokescreen that masks the deeper issues that are not being addressed within the climate change arena, and that is the continued support of the mechanisms by which power is concentrated in the hands of male actors, from the education system to the media industry. This is where the philosopher Foucault’s (1980) theory of power comes into play, the ‘regimes of truth’ he speaks of that are pervasive and reinforced by social institutions through the language used in communications, that lead to people, in this case women, not only being oppressed, but playing a part in that oppression. An example of this is where women interviewed in the COP21 newspaper articles refer to their gender as being ‘vulnerable’ and ‘weak’. Arora-Jonsson (2011) argues that by continuing to apply language that is associated with victimhood and vulnerability to descriptions of women in relation to climate change, it disempowers and ignores women’s capacity for equal involvement in the decision making processes. Where women are in visible positions of power, or have attained some form of leadership, they are cloaked in language that marks them out as somehow savior-like, or as possessing ‘virtue’ as Arora-Jonsson (2011) describes it. This too is counter-productive as it suggests that only ‘special’ women can attain such status, and once again ignores the systems that prevent many women, especially those in the global south, of progressing to a place where they too can fulfil their capacity. Of course, this data is small and is limited to English-language reports. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that there could be more incisive reporting on gender and COP21 in non-English newspapers. In order to have more thorough research into the media discourse on gender and COP 21 it would be beneficial to carry out a collaborative project with researchers of different nationalities. While in recent years the issues surrounding women and climate change have gained more

attention, this is not significant when compared to how much discussion is given to topics such as carbon markets, and other mitigation strategies within academic research. This lack of research is a limitation for this study, but it is also an opportunity for the academic community to take on the challenge of raising awareness of this deeply important issue.

6. Conclusion

The consequences of ignoring the needs and the talents of half the population when it comes to prevention, mitigation and adaptation in climate change are immeasurable. By only telling half the story, the world is missing out on half the potential answers for facing up to this enormous challenge. As feminist writers have long argued, patriarchy not only oppresses women but the population as a whole, with men also denied the means by which to help secure a harmonious future. As this research has shown to a certain extent, the real issue that is not being tackled adequately is that of access to power, and until this situation is addressed, then the Paris Agreement, and any climate change strategies to come, will be steeped in difficulties. However, recent events have given rise to hope, with the organising of the Women’s March on January 21st as a response to the election of President Donald Trump. Despite the danger that President Trump poses to both climate change and women’s rights, if the outcome of the Women’s March is that women stop asking, and start demanding, for their inclusion in the design and implementation of policies that impact upon them, then there is a potential for significant future changes in the balance of power.

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