

# The Socio-Economic Impact of Climate Change Through an Interdisciplinary Lens: How Does Climate Change Impact Women and Racialized Minorities?

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## Abstract

This essay analyses how climate change impacts women and racialized minorities socially and economically. This research is done through an interdisciplinary lens to understand the impact of climate change beyond environmental issues. This research essay is structured according to Repko and Szostak's (2017) ten interdisciplinary research steps and approached from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989). This essay integrates the disciplines of environmental studies, equality studies and social studies. It concludes that climate change has greater effects on racialized minorities and women, both economically and socially. At the economic level, both groups experience loss of livelihoods, shelter, and sometimes complete displacement. At the social level, both groups experience the loss of their communities and the loss of access to government aid, and they are less likely to fully recover from climate events. Additionally, women of colour are the most affected by climate change. This inequity brings forward the need to develop climate policies that are intersectional and address systemic discrimination faced by the many intersections of racialized minorities.

**Keywords:** climate change, racialized minorities, interdisciplinary research, women of colour, climate events

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## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) published a report in 2017 outlining the ways in which disadvantaged groups disproportionately suffer the consequences of climate change when compared to their wealthier counterparts (Islam and Winkel, 2017). Climate change affects more than just our climate, it affects our livelihoods, our farms, our supply chain, and our people. Islam and Winkel (2017) explain that “the relationship between climate change and social inequality is characterized by a vicious cycle, whereby initial inequality makes a disadvantaged group suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change, resulting in greater subsequent inequality [emphasis from source]” (p. 2). This paper aims to answer the question: how does climate change impact women and racialized minorities, socially and economically? This research will be done through an interdisciplinary lens to understand the impact of climate change beyond environmental consequences. The disciplines which will be studied are environmental studies, equality studies and social theory, with the goal to understand climate change and its impact, to understand where racialized minorities fit within inegalitarian society, and to understand the theories behind racism and discrimination.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) was the first person to coin the term intersectionality. She explained that when a marginalised person falls within two or more types of minorities, they face more discrimination than those who only fall in one intersection. As an example, a woman of colour is likely to be discriminated for being both a woman and a person of colour, while a white woman is just discriminated for being a woman. By studying the intersections in which marginalised groups fall, Crenshaw (1989) was able to show how feminist theory and anti-racist policies were failing women of colour. This essay aims to study the impact of climate change from an intersectional perspective to understand specifically how racialized minorities, women and women in racialized minorities are affected socially and economically.

When it comes to the impacts of climate change, research on this topic either focuses on in-country differences or between-countries differences. For this paper, both perspectives will be used throughout and will be clarified as needed. Furthermore, the terms Developing Countries and

Developed Countries are used interchangeably with Global South and Global North respectively. According to the UN (2014), developed countries are those in Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Additionally, the UN (2014) differentiates between transitioning economies and developing economies, for the purpose of this research, all other countries are considered developing or part of the Global South. I am part of a few intersections: I am a woman, an immigrant, and a person of colour, therefore, I have a lot in common with those same groups that will be examined through this research.

### **Methodology**

This research essay was structured according to Repko and Szostak's (2017) interdisciplinary research steps (Appendix A). The first step is to establish the research question: How does climate change impact women and racialized minorities, socially and economically?

Second, the reason to use an interdisciplinary scope is to study climate change from a social and economic perspective, and further to this, the intersectional approach of this study brings equality and anti-racist theories that add perspective and context to the analysis of the issue. Third, the disciplines were chosen based on their potential to answer the question from an interdisciplinary perspective that looks for both social and economic issues.

The fourth and fifth steps, conducting the literature review and developing adequacy in the disciplines, are captured in the literature review and further demonstrated throughout the essay. The authors analysed were chosen based on their relevance and impact in the disciplines of importance, and the time of publishing. The aim was to include literature published from 2012 onwards, since both environmental and social sciences continuously evolve and current data is critical; however, some research on equality and feminism dates back to 1999. Research papers were chosen based on keywords from the research question through Google Scholar and the Athabasca University Library Open Access. Furthermore, authors were chosen from previous

classes attended at Athabasca University, which focused on understanding equality, discrimination, and climate change from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Sixth, the analysis of the problem and the insight of each discipline are captured under the Analysis section. Steps seven and eight, identifying conflicts and common ground between the disciplines, are also demonstrated throughout the Analysis section. Step nine, developing further understanding of the disciplines, is demonstrated throughout the research essay. Finally, step ten is communicating the new understanding, which is shown in the conclusion of this research essay.

Research can be both interdisciplinary and intersectional, while intersectional research is almost always interdisciplinary, both intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches are used throughout the essay. Even though intersectionality has no academically defined methodology, Kaijser and Kronsell (2014) argue that studying a subject from an intersectional perspective should include methodologies and theories used in the disciplines where intersections occur. For this paper, there are intersections between the disciplines of climate change, equality studies and social sciences, which will be explored in depth in the analysis section.

## **Literature Review**

### **Environmental Studies**

Klein (2015) argues that giant oil companies in the 1980s knew their extracting activities would eventually lead to climate change, but the extreme profitability took precedence over environmental responsibility. The author explains that many industries are so dependent on oil extraction for products like gas and plastic that it has become increasingly hard to stop using it. Furthermore, she argues that all the finite resources are being depleted without any concern for future generations, and the only way to slow down climate change is to fully stop extracting fossil fuels. Kolbert (2014) explains that humans have created the next extinction event through carbon emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>), which have worsened through the industrial revolution and the ongoing

extraction of fossil fuels. The author argues the climate of Earth is rapidly changing; winters are colder, summers are warmer, and floods and droughts worsen each year. Extracting activities around the world affect clean water sources for farmers which in turn affect other's abilities to procure food. In other words, Kolbert explains that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions affect the entire planet's regenerative cycle. Excessive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions impact everyone, from the richest to the poorest, from the smallest animal to the largest human, and its consequences are already being seen.

Gough (2017) explains that the 1% of the wealthiest people on Earth produce approximately 50% of the carbon emissions: a clear example of inequality across borders. He explains that “[t]he fundamental driver of global warming has been a combination of fossil-based industrialisation and global capitalism – carboniferous capitalism” (Gough, 2017, p. 8). The constant need for economic growth and consumerism is slowly destroying the planet. The author further states that there are two types of global inequalities: the first is between countries, and the second is within countries. The Global North wealthier class sits on one end of the spectrum, while the Global South's poorest class sits on the other end. The Global North average citizens produce about four times more CO<sub>2</sub> than the Global South wealthiest class; however, the production of goods is more likely to come from the Global South, which is likely to have fewer working standards, safety precautions, or fair pay. Both Klein (2015) and Gough (2017) argue that those who produce the most carbon emissions should also be responsible for bringing solutions forward, such as sustainable energy sources and moving away from fossil fuels.

## **Equality Studies**

Gosepath (2021) argues that equality can have several meanings based on context. Equality can be measured in economic terms, social terms, healthcare access and availability, food access, and shelter access. Gosepath (2021) explains that concepts of equality can even be different for two people that are considered 'equal' by certain parameters. The author maintains that in the modern context, equality means having equal access to aspects of life that improve it, such as health, shelter, water, and paid work.

Chinkin (1999) explains that globally, women are more likely to live in poverty, have lower education, do most of the unpaid housework and be paid less than their male counterparts. This is likely to be the case in both developed and developing countries. Additionally, Blewitt (2018) argues economic growth does not equal development; development should not be measured in terms of economic gains or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, but instead internal inequality, access to health, housing, and food. Furthermore, the author argues that thinking of poverty in Western terms also diminishes the Global South's potential development (Blewitt, 2018).

### **Social Theory**

Hill Collins (2013) argues, "exclusion from basic literacy, quality educational experiences and faculty administrative positions has limited Black women's access to influential academic positions" (p. 352). Even though the author focuses on Black women, the same notion can be applied to people of colour or women (and the intersection of both) who suffer the disadvantages of systemic discrimination inside and outside the educational sphere. Additionally, Hill Collins (2013) explains that tackling systemic racism and discrimination includes changing the ways in which knowledge is produced and verified and that modern day knowledge/truth notions are based on westernised views of development, mainly written by and studied for white men.

### **Analysis and Integration**

How does climate change impact women and racialized minorities, socially and economically? In this section, different perspectives are explored to attempt to answer this question while maintaining an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective.

Men dominate positions of power, both in companies that produce fossil fuels and agencies that respond to climate emergencies (Perkins, 2018). This makes them less likely to consider the inequality and the different needs that women might have during these emergencies, such as the availability of menstrual supplies in shelters and private spaces for breastfeeding. Perkins (2018)

explains that women are more likely to think about the environment and climate change than men. Men are more likely to dominate spaces where policies are developed, and therefore the gendered lens of climate change is not often considered during the development of environmental policies (Perkins, 2018). This gendered view also means that these policies do not include relief resources for those who are most likely to be affected by climatic events, women, and racialized minorities. Climate Justice is the term coined to simultaneously address inequality and climate change effects (Sultana, 2021). However, Sultana calls for more international support for those communities that have been affected the most by climate change yet have contributed the least in carbon emissions and GHG globally (2021), such as sub-Saharan and South American countries. Current social and economic structures further grow carbon emissions and deepen the systematic discrimination that racialized minorities and women already face. These two authors concur that new economic and social structures are needed, and these must account for the intersectionality that exists within racialized minorities, such as gender, migration status, race, class, and indigeneity.

Addressing issues intersectionally makes them more complex, but it also demonstrates how addressing one issue can address several others at the same time (Chinkin, 1999). For example, in the gender pay gap scale, white men are at one end of the spectrum and women of colour are at the other (Miller and Vagins, 2018). By addressing the gender pay gap intersectionally, it is possible to address the steeper pay gap that many women of colour experience when compared to white men or women. Therefore, by addressing climate change in an intersectional manner, it is possible to colloquially ‘kill two birds with one stone,’ or in this case, potentially several birds.

Kaijser and Kronsell (2014) argue, “Those most exposed and vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change are poor and marginalised people living particularly in low-income areas. These groups tend, moreover, to be underrepresented at all levels of decision-making regarding climate issues” (p. 418). The authors explain that climate change studies in the Global North have mostly focused on environmental sciences and natural sciences, but there has been a slow turn towards the humanities in the studies of climate change. By looking at climate change intersectionally, the voices of the marginalised communities are encouraged to come forward, voices which are often

excluded from these conversations, and therefore comprehensive solutions can be created for both the planet and minorities. For example, during an extreme heat wave, those experiencing homelessness are less likely to find appropriate shelter and are more likely to suffer health afflictions like dehydration and heat stroke (Hoogeveen et al., 2021); thus, by investing in sustainable shelters and the creation of new sustainable jobs, governments would be able to better protect and aid the homeless population.

Moreover, it can be argued that sustainable development is an oxymoron that can ironically be achieved (Blewitt, 2018). To achieve it, Blewitt (2018) explains that the planet and natural habitat must be conserved, equality must be promoted both socially and economically, and it must also be sought between nations and within nations. Sustainability cannot be achieved without caring for the planet, and addressing these issues as symbiotic relationships allows global and local communities to succeed within their own means. Blewitt (2018) claims harming nature equals harming oneself in the long term. Planet Earth is cyclical and needs time to replenish resources to thrive, and therefore humans' existence on the planet must also allow for the replenishment cycle to take place.

Environmental issues, however, can vary widely by country, especially when comparing the Global North and Global South (Redclift and Sage, 1999). Developed countries see environmental issues as the protection of ecosystems, recycling and using alternative sources of energy, while developing countries see environmental issues as having shelter and food available, regardless of the source. Therefore, research and development from the Global North might not aid the Global South. Instead, the Global South should be aided in developing their own technological advancements that work within their borders and that address issues like shelter, food, and sustainable energy altogether.

Versey (2021) echoes Gough's (2017) and Kaijser and Kronsell's (2014) thesis that minorities are more likely to be affected by climate change and adds that it takes them longer to recover from the effects of it by inherently having less resources at all government levels and at a personal level.

For example, after Hurricane Katrina landed on the southern US coast, flood levels reached up to 20 feet (Pettersen et al., 2006). Entire towns and cities were evacuated, with many people having nowhere to go. Job losses drove the unemployment rate up, store fronts and business spent weeks closed, and recovery efforts from local, state, and federal governments were not enough to sway people to return, which created a vicious cycle of not enough jobs, not enough people and not enough economic strength for redevelopment (Pettersen et al., 2006). Versey (2021) argues that racialized minorities are least likely to come back to the affected cities if they are displaced by a climate event, which often translates to fewer people living there, fewer taxes being paid, and even fewer resources available for future events; this was documented extensively after Hurricane Katrina. Policies that are developed intersectionally to address poverty, housing and healthcare are more likely to address systemic disadvantages often furthered by climate change events, and are also more likely to create a space where disadvantaged minorities can recover from displacement and job loss.

### **Economic Impacts of Climate Change**

Developing countries need economic and technological help before being expected to stop extracting raw materials from Earth (Gough, 2017; Klein, 2015). When global emissions are examined, it becomes clear that the majority of historical greenhouse gas emissions come from developed countries in the process of developing their economies (Klein, 2015). However, nowadays GHG emissions come primarily from countries with big raw material reserves or an established production infrastructure, such as Canada, Italy, Russia, China, India, and Brazil, and from developed countries that have high emissions per capita, such as the United States, Western Europe and Australia (Klein, 2015). Consequently, greenhouse gas emissions impact global, federal, state and even local governments at different levels; climate change is a global problem that needs both global and local solutions.

Additionally, it can be argued that the Global South is being kept indebted to the Global North in order to slow down their development. Prashad (2007) explains that off the \$523 billion debt from

the South to the North, \$550 billion have been paid, yet \$523 billion are still owed due to inflation rates increasing since the 1970s. How can the South be expected to develop their healthcare, water and food access if they are seemingly forever tied to foreign debt that keeps increasing every year? Accordingly, the Global South need both financial and technological aid to lower their overall emissions, and improve their citizens' access to basic needs, and the Global North needs to lower their per capita consumption emissions and forgive the foreign debt from the Global South. Furthermore, Blewitt (2018) argues that sustainable development and economic growth cannot be tied together. A country that operates sustainably cannot achieve yearly economic growth, because sustainability means to live within the means of the resources in the environment (Blewitt, 2018). There would be economic growth for a period of time, but once the limit of resources is reached, the economy would plateau. This is not achievable in the current capitalist and consumerist world view of most countries and governments.

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier: those who currently struggle with poverty or housing are likely to struggle more during a climatic event than their wealthier counterparts (Gough, 2017). Disadvantaged minorities are more likely to live in poorly made housing, usually located in places that are more likely to be affected by flooding or erosion (Nazrul Islam and Winkel, 2017). And low-income households are less likely to have insurance for flooding, droughts, or fires. Additionally, low-income households that can afford this type of insurance, on average spend a larger percentage of their income for it when compared to middle-income or high-income households (Patankar, 2015). Examples of economic consequences after climate events, such as droughts or floods, are farmers losing their livelihood, which could drive up food prices and insecurities, or rent being increased to retrofit the higher cost of electricity during heat waves, which inevitably affects lower income households more than higher income households (Hoogeveen et al., 2021). Marginalised minorities are less likely to evacuate during climate emergencies and more likely to pay the high cost of being forcibly displaced. Furthermore, when food prices are raised, low-income households are using a larger percentage of their income to purchase food than middle- or high-income households. In other words, low- and middle-income

households might spend the same dollar amount in food, but the percentage of this amount against their income is greater for low-income households (Hallegatte et al., 2016)

As a solution, some governments enforce carbon taxation, which is an added tax percentage to certain industries that produce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over a set threshold (Government of Canada, 2022). However, most global policies and NGOs focus economic relief on big climate events like Katrina instead of slower climate change consequences like the rise of Earth's temperature or melting of ice caps (Nazrul Islam and Winkel, 2017).

### **Social Impacts of Climate Change**

Developed countries worry about environmental impacts and recycling facilities (Blewitt, 2018) and view climate change as something that affects their wealthy lifestyle in ways such as turning on fewer lights or wasting less food (Redclift and Sage, 1999). On the other hand, developing countries worry about food scarcity, droughts, floods, education, sanitation, and shelter (Blewitt, 2018), and they are affected in more crucial ways like food shortages, lack of shelter and survival (Redclift and Sage, 1999). These two variables can also be observed both between countries and within countries. Within countries, racialized minorities are most likely affected by the latter variables than their affluent counterparts due to having less economic resources, lack of transportation or loss of employment.

This phenomenon is also known as poverty ecology versus wealth ecology, to differentiate the way in which different households and countries perceive the climate change threat (Redclift and Sage, 1999). Redclift and Sage (1999) argue that developed countries worry about the livelihood of future generations while developing countries worry about the current generations' survival (1999). This same principle can be applied to high-income households worrying about their children's future and low-income households worrying about making ends meet or being able to afford food or rent this month.

Racial minorities are more likely to be affected by climate change because they are more likely to be low-income, in poorly built and poorly maintained households (Nazrul Islam and Winkel, 2017). Additionally, disadvantaged minorities are more likely to be susceptible to climate events that displace them entirely, such as flooding, mud slides, drought and erosion (Nazrul Islam and Winkel, 2017). An example of this is the sub-Saharan desertification that affects women primarily: women are more likely to be the ones responsible for seeking water for the household, and this can sometimes mean spending the entire day walking to and from water sources, which in turn makes them dependent on others for food and shelter (Tandon, 2007). This shows one of the intersections where racialized minorities and low-income households experience more severe consequences of climate change.

Ecofeminism “aims to explain and transform the current system of domination and violence by focusing on the critique of patriarchy and the overexploitation of nature and their impacts on society” (Peredo Beltran, 2017, p. 101). Racialized minorities and women are often forgotten by climate change policies and climate change crisis responses from governments. Graad (2015) argues that climate change policies that do not include an intersectional perspective emphasise the gender and racial inequalities experienced by minorities. Therefore, developing climate policies should include the voices of women and racialized minorities, as this is crucial for the advancement of these minorities while also relevant to the global issue being faced in climate change.

### **Conclusion**

Climate change affects racialized minorities and women both economically and socially. At the economic level, both groups experience loss of livelihoods, shelter, and sometimes complete displacement. At the social level, both groups experience the loss of their communities, lose access to governmental aid, and are less likely to fully recover from climate events. Additionally, women of colour are the most affected by climate change, which brings forward the need to develop climate policies that are intersectional and address systemic discrimination faced by the many intersections of racialized minorities.

The current capitalist and free market world views affect both our planet and our fellow humans in various ways. It is crucial to develop policies that address systematic oppression and the effects of climate change on racialized communities and women. Policies need to consider issues from an intersectional perspective as a starting point to create solutions that involve different intersections instead of trying to address them separately. It is imperative to create comprehensive social and economic policies that address racism, discrimination, gender issues, and health access simultaneously while also addressing global issues such as climate change and economic sustainability.

Furthermore, there is a need for the development of new economic and social structures that eliminate systemic discrimination, reduce humans' carbon footprint, and transition away from the capitalist mindset. In order to achieve this governments need to invest in sustainable power sources, farming, education, infrastructure, and social resources, and ultimately let go of the idea that economic growth is necessary. The funds for this investment could come from taxing the 1% net gain of the world's richest 1%; this would be enough to convert current extractive power sources into sustainable sources, provide more resources to racialized minorities, and help transition the transportation and shipping sectors into sustainable vehicles (Klein 2015). Another way to move away from extracting activities is for the Global South debt to be forgiven so funds can be invested in healthcare, shelter, and food access, which in turn reduce CO2 emissions and improve the livelihoods of racialized minorities. Further research should focus on the economic and social impact of current climate policies and on the development of new economic and social structures where minorities can thrive.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1**

*The 7 Steps of Interdisciplinary Research*

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights	Step 1	Define the problem or state research question
	Step 2	Justify using an interdisciplinary approach
	Step 3	Identify relevant disciplines
	Step 4	Conduct the literature search
	Step 5	Develop adequacy in each relevant discipline
	Step 6	Analyse the problem and evaluate each insight or theory
Integrating disciplinary insights	Step 7	Identify conflicts between insights and their sources
	Step 9	Create a common ground between insights
	Step 9	Construct a more comprehensive understanding
	Step 10	Reflect on, test, and communicate the understanding

*Note: Repko & Szostak (2017)*

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