

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/10/18/the-colonial-legacy-of-climate-vulnerability-a-postcolonial-feminist-analysis/>

GEORGIA BANDEY, OCT 18 2025

Climate change vulnerability is increasingly acknowledged as falling disproportionately on the global South and marginalised indigenous communities (Guivarch et al., 2021). However, Whyte (2017) contests dominant ahistorical narratives that attribute vulnerability to naturalised or geographical causes, as this fails to address the process of colonialism that lies at the heart of the problem. To further this valuable contention, this essay adopts a postcolonial feminist analytical lens to comprehensively analyse how the dominant narratives of climate change vulnerability are gendered and contribute to Mohanty's (1984) critique of the Eurocentric portrayal of a homogenous 'Third World Woman'. This essay contests the narrative of climate vulnerability as 'natural' by centring the global South and racialised women that have been constructed as inherent victims. Conversely, this essay contends that the simultaneous logics of and the material outcomes of colonialism lie at the heart of the problem of climate change vulnerability. The conceptualisation of 'postcolonial' does not refer to the demise of colonialism; rather, it serves to contest persistent colonial legacies and delve beyond the dominating Eurocentric analyses that standardise European biases (Rutazibwa and Shilliam, 2018). Adopting a postcolonial feminist framework involves interrogating such colonial legacies and problematising the marginalisation of subjugated groups such as women in the global South.

This essay proceeds by analysing the epistemological foundations of a colonial regime of truth that serves to discursively construct racial, cultural, and sexual inferiority as a rationality of colonial domination (Bhabha, 1994). Colonialism physically dominated through violent dispossession and destruction of native people, their land, cultures, and relationships with nature (Singh, 2023). To remain within the scope of this essay, the focus will centre on racial and gendered colonial constructions that have contributed to positioning colonised people and environments as 'resources' to be exploited (Duffy, 2018). This section contests narrow accounts of climate change vulnerability by situating the problem as rooted in persistent colonial epistemological foundations. Furthermore, colonial logics that marginalise women in the global South will be explored to contextualise rather than naturalise their subjugation that increases their climate change vulnerability. This is followed by an examination of the material implications of colonial logics and power dynamics in the context of modern approaches to 'sustainability' in the West. This section utilises the example of the 'sustainable' shift to electric vehicles that increases demands for lithium-ion batteries, thus inflicting social and environmental harm that imposes climate change vulnerability upon marginalised communities through cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Nkulu et al., 2018).

Epistemological Foundations

Dominant climate change narratives have advanced to consider vulnerability as disproportionately burdening the global South, noting drivers such as 'inequality' or 'poverty', whilst maintaining a neoliberal, individualist attribution of mutual human accountability (Guivarch et al., 2021). For example, Patwary (2012) depicts Bangladesh as uniquely geographically vulnerable, failing to consider historical colonial contributions such as the British colonial destruction of 700,000 acres of its land for tea plantations (Jenkins, 2010). This naturalisation of vulnerability fails to address the colonial power dynamics and logics at the root of 'poverty' or the imposition of nature as an exploitable 'resource'. To comprehensively address this, colonialism must be understood as constructing a regime of truth that discursively produces the 'other' that is racially, culturally, or sexually inferior; thus, assigning power to the coloniser and

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

advancing the teleology of colonial domination (Bhabha, 1994; Quijano, 2007). The following section will analyse this colonial regime of truth, with a focus on the colonial constructions of race, gender, and anthropocentric environmental approaches, to contend that colonialism is at the heart of climate change vulnerability.

The development of Enlightenment thinking prized 'progression' as driven by 'rationality' and 'reason' that was deemed natural to 'advanced' European races and unattainable to the racialised colonised, thus constructing them as closer to nature and exploitable 'resources' (Mahmud, 1999; Saini, 2019). Memmi (1974) outlines how this construction of deficiency proposes a coloniser's requirement to 'protect' the colonised from themselves; therefore, excluding them from positions of power becomes their own best 'interest'. This was directly embedded with perceptions of different environmental conditions, such as the tropics as producing people with natural moral degeneration and incapability, which proposed environmental control as a necessary colonial enterprise (Endfield, 2017). As a moral necessity to 'civilise' and 'progress', such colonial rationalities have induced climate change vulnerability by imposing environmental depletion through privatisation, 'resource' exploitation or mass deforestation of colonised lands (Duffy, 2018). This has led to the global North historically contributing more to global emissions and enforcing anthropocentric environmental approaches to supply markets in the global North (Ekowati et al., 2023).

This colonial construction of racial superiority facilitated the colonial domination of nature that led to "food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development orientated solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries" (Césaire, 2000; pg. 43). Sealey-Huggins (2017) delineates how this colonial structure permitted wealth to accumulate in the West and imposed capitalist economic growth as infinitely attainable, leaving previously colonised nations without financial capacity or power to respond to climate change or lead global responses. Furthermore, Parasram and Tilley (2018) outline how this imposes the hyper-consumptionist, 'developed' standard of Western anthropocentrism as a 'rational' knowledge system and diminishes alternative protective ontologies of nature as 'irrational' and 'pre-modern'. This colonial imposition of anthropocentric climate change as a capitalist enterprise diminished indigenous knowledge systems, approaches to working with nature and adapting to climate change (Whyte, 2017). This argument can be strengthened by understanding this in terms of Spivak's (1988) conceptualisation of 'epistemic violence' that is induced by dominant knowledge systems marginalising alternative epistemologies. This form of epistemic violence remains pertinent in contemporary international climate responses that marginalise the global South through colonial power dynamics in negotiations, permitting Eurocentric hegemony and the devaluation of alternative environmental epistemologies to persist (Sultana, 2022).

To address this, Parasram and Tilley (2018) propose that the knowledge systems of those who are suffering from colonially induced climate change vulnerability but resist colonial hegemony should be central to a global response to climate change. However, this reflects colonialism's exploitation of colonised knowledge systems, such as mining and agricultural knowledge, that simultaneously imposed that Western knowledge was superior but out of reach from the colonised (Quijano, 2007). As Whyte (2017) cautions, indigenous groups have credible concerns that this may permit climate scientists to reinforce colonial power dynamics by exploiting indigenous knowledge systems. Sultana (2022) more compellingly proposes that the imposition of climate vulnerability cannot be addressed without structural changes in international governance and dismantling the underlying coloniality of education systems, nature as a 'commodity' and other Eurocentric impositions.

Moreover, colonial power dynamics and epistemic violence must be addressed as further subjugating colonised women who are unable to 'speak' due to the mutually dominating forces of colonialism and the construct of gender (Spivak, 1988). This is evident as women in the global South are increasingly recognised as more vulnerable to climate change, with accounts often addressing inequalities such as women's greater impoverishment (Denton, 2010). However, as MacGregor (2010) contends, dominant narratives often utilise empirical data to construct women as materially vulnerable to climate change, failing to address the underlying social roots or engage with their diverse experiences. This leads to women's further marginalisation from climate change adaptations or approaches, as they are only permitted to enter the debate as homogenous objects that are passive and voiceless (MacGregor, 2010). For example, UN Women (2022) contend that "across the world, women depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources", attributing victimhood to naturalised 'dependency' without addressing the underlying colonial subjugation of women or problematising the colonial imposition of nature as a 'resource'. Such conceptualisations of women's vulnerability conform to Western constructions of a homogenous 'Third World Woman' as inherently

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

'passive' and 'victim', dismissing their resistance and perceiving their problems as independent from the West (Mohanty, 1984).

It is imperative that analyses situate women's disproportionate vulnerability as rooting from this colonial classification that informed colonial labour divisions, excluded colonised women from the public sphere, and imposed sexual relations that permeate the modern gender system (Lugones, 2007). Lugones (2007) strengthens Quijano's (2007) conceptualisation of the coloniality of power that naturalises classifications of 'race' and 'inferiority' by addressing the simultaneous imposition of gender as a colonial system of power. This is exemplified as Alexander and Mohanty (1997; pg. 23) outline the persistence of the colonial disciplining of women's bodies "as global workers and sexual labourers [...] or criminalised as prostitutes and lesbians; and [...] as wives and mothers." This elucidates the colonial epistemological foundations of their subjugation, such as their restriction to the private sphere or imposed naturalised roles of 'wives' or 'mothers', that prevent economic independence and disempower them, debilitating climate mitigation. However, it is significant to consider that racialised men were also feminised to increase their subjugation and prevent them from obtaining the privileged white colonisers' standard of masculinity (Said, 1978). Furthermore, analyses of gender as a synonym for women, without addressing gender as a construction of femininity and masculinity, can further the position of women as 'other' as they become 'gendered', and masculinity remains the norm (MacGregor, 2010). The colonial logics that construct gender simultaneously contribute to the climate change vulnerability of all who subvert the standardised Western masculinity by marginalising them from equal power or economic sustenance.

Furthermore, the colonial imposition of a nature-dominating relationship relied on gendered categorisations, such as introducing land ownership by assigning colonised men plots of land with the condition that they would exploit this for the benefit of the coloniser (Ferdinand et al., 2022). Unequal land rights and land disposessions diminished women's relationships with nature and contributed to their disempowerment, such as economic dependence (Verma, 2014). This persists contemporarily, as only 20% of global landowners are women (UN Women, 2022), increasing their poverty and lack of independence. Proposing racialised women's inherent victimhood, without situating their marginalised position in the context of colonialism and resistances to this, further contributes to their colonial position of subjugation that has made them vulnerable to climate change. However, problematising the conflation of women with victims can have a negative outcome of attempts to situate women as the responsible, individual 'heroes' of the environment due to their resilience to the climate change vulnerability imposed on them (Chiro, 2007). This individualisation of the response to climate change places an increased burden upon marginalised people and maintains a mutual accountability narrative that permits the West to disproportionately pollute whilst avoiding the necessary structural changes to prevent the colonial imposition of climate change vulnerability. Therefore, this essay does not aim to conversely situate women as climate 'heroes'; rather, it emphasises the necessity of contesting dominant narratives that fail to situate climate vulnerability as embedded with colonialism.

Material Implications: Modern Sustainability

"With much industry outsourced from the UK over the last century to countries with less stringent human rights and environmental regulations, it is possible for many in the UK to live without considering either the social or environmental costs of high consumption lifestyles." (Ekowati et al., 2023; pg. 30)

Colonialism continues to impose climate change vulnerability upon the global South through material implications of its pervasive logics in Western approaches to modern 'sustainability'. The contemporary shift to 'sustainability' roots from the colonially embedded notions of 'progress' as driven by scientific and technological advancements, maintaining the imperial global imposition of the West's dominating and exploitative relationship with nature (Geisinger, 1999). An example of this is the shift to electric vehicles as a means of environmental sustainment for the West. This 'sustainable' move involves the extensive mining of cobalt that is largely supplied from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and is not so 'sustainable' for those suffering from the resulting radioactive emissions detrimental to their health and the consequential environmental harm (Farjana et al., 2019). Ortar and Ryghaug (2019) attempt to synthesise the European debate surrounding electric vehicle use by including marginalised perspectives; yet the harrowing impacts upon resource sourcing countries, such as the DRC, are absent from the discussion. Broadbent et al.'s (2017) study similarly reports Western concerns surrounding the shift to electric

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

vehicles, including affordability, recharging accessibility and up-to-date information, maintaining the failure to address the global implications and the detriment to the global South. This approach to Western sustainability fails to situate this in the wider power dynamics and colonial structure that impose climate vulnerability upon the global South. Such analyses reveal that concerns surrounding the West's shift to 'sustainability' conform to the colonial Eurocentric world view that the global South and its environment exist as resources for the benefit of the dominating Western nations.

The colonial power dynamic of extensive exploitation of racialised people and environments as economic resources for the benefit of Western 'progress' and 'development' materialises climate vulnerability in the global South under the guise of 'sustainability'. Climate change vulnerability is imposed upon the DRC through this, as mining processes do not begin on uninhabited lands; rather, the colonial practices of displacement, relocation, and destruction of land are the physical starting points (Ferdinand et al., 2022). This is delineated in Bamana et al.'s (2021) comprehensive study that avoids dominant Eurocentric approaches and the problem of speaking for and marginalising non-Western voices through conducting interviews, focus groups and participant observations that directly engage with those most impacted in the DRC. This study reveals prevalent colonial practices of land grabbing from residents unable to obtain land titles, cheap labour exploitation including child labour, and destruction of their local environments (Bamana et al., 2021). As Whyte (2017) contends, such processes marginalise indigenous communities' vast strategies of coping with climate change whilst rapidly driving the causal environmental destruction.

From this process, Nkulu et al. (2018) find that the Congolese people are directly burdened with resulting severe environmental pollution and detriment to their health; however, their study narrowly attributes this to poor governance and disregard of sustainability by the buyer. This fails to address the driving force of colonialism that makes imposing climate change vulnerability upon marginalised communities a feasible process for the possessors of power. For example, the biopolitical control of racialised bodies facilitates the use and control of those who are marginalised in a colonial system of power imbalance (Stoler, 1995). This can more adequately account for the colonial rationality of exploiting Congolese miners for labour, as their bodies are racialised to signify a subhuman that becomes a resource for the coloniser. However, as Nkulu et al. (2018) delineate, this biopower directly regulates the Congolese workers' survival due to health and environmental impacts, which is more effectively exemplified by Mbembe's (1957) conceptualisation of necropolitics. This outlines colonial power over racialised bodies, constructing them as possessions and resources of the coloniser and dictating their survival or exposure to death (Mbembe, 1957). Climate change vulnerability is existentially threatening to marginalised communities, and this emphasises the necessity of situating the colonial rooting of such processes.

This devaluation of racialised bodies is further elucidated by Butler's (2004) depiction of racialised lives being deemed less grievable from a Western lens. As De Jong (2022) significantly delineates, this informs whose lives are deemed unworthy of 'sustainment' as they are presently destroyed, without the privilege of a 'sustainable' future, despite their historically lower emissions. This is exemplified through 'sustainable' temperature targets that apply a universal climate 'solution' that fails to address the underlying colonial causes or protect marginalised lives already being lost (Sealey-Huggins, 2017). Furthermore, the Western shift to electric vehicles as an attempt to 'sustain' Western lives maintains environmentally destructive overconsumption that is already eradicating marginalised lives and disproportionately imposing vulnerability (Ekowati et al., 2023).

Moreover, colonially induced climate change vulnerability imposed upon the DRC through 'sustainability' in the West exemplifies racialised women's vulnerability that roots from colonial gender power relations. For example, Sovacool (2021) outlines how gendered patterns of labour, violence and sexual abuse, or dispossession, all disproportionately impact women, exacerbating their vulnerability to climate change from cobalt mining. Sovacool's (2021; pg. 281) interviews directly engage with the miners, significantly integrating their personal experiences and finding that "Congolese women constitute a growing proportion of miners and workers but, due to their low status, are generally forced to undertake the most strenuous or poorly paid activities." This aligns with Lugones' (2007) understanding of the colonial construction of racialised women as 'sexually aggressive' and 'subverting' the white feminine standard, depicting their 'masculine strength' to perform dangerous and intense labour for the coloniser. Supporting this, Stoler's (1995) analysis of biopower as the colonial bodily regulation of race and sexuality outlines this as constructing colonised people as 'sexually disordered', subverting from Europeans through 'sexual diseases' and

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

'prostitution'. This indicates that colonialism is at the heart of women's increased climate change vulnerability, as they are positioned as inferior and disempowered by colonial essentialist categories that facilitate their bodily control, economic marginalisation, and exploitation. Women in the DRC are not 'naturally' more vulnerable to climate change; rather, they are disempowered by the persistent power structures of colonialism that are at the heart of climate change vulnerability for those in the global South.

Conclusion

This essay has analysed the epistemological foundations of a colonial regime of truth and the material implications of this to contend that colonialism lies at the heart of the climate change vulnerability of the global South. This aligns with Whyte's (2017) contestation of dominant narratives that attribute climate vulnerability to natural or geographical causes. However, this essay has furthered this contention to address the disproportionate climate change vulnerability that is imposed upon women in the global South that is often narrowly attributed to naturalised victimhood. This essay begins by analysing colonial constructions of race and gender and the imposition of Western anthropocentric approaches to the environment that have contributed to disproportionate global emissions and unequal vulnerability. The following section examines the material outcomes of this, through the example of cobalt mining in the DRC that imposes vulnerability on native communities and further subjugates racialised women. This informs the contention that colonialism drives climate change vulnerability in the global South through colonial constructions of race and gender that are embedded in Western modern sustainability practices that exploit the global South. It is imperative that climate change vulnerability is addressed as colonially induced and significantly gendered.

Bibliography

- Bamana, G. et al. (2021) *Addressing the social life cycle inventory analysis data gap: Insights from a case study of cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. *One Earth*, 4(12), pp. 1704–1714.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994) *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Broadbent, G.H., Drozdowski, D. and Metternicht, G. (2017) *Electric vehicle adoption: An analysis of best practice and pitfalls for policy making from experiences of Europe and the US*. *Geography Compass*, 12(2), e12358.
- Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Vancouver: Verso.
- Césaire, A. (2000) *Discourse on colonialism*. In *Discourse on Colonialism* (pp. 29–78). New York: NYU Press. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfkrm.4>
- Chiro, G. (2017) 'Welcome to the White (M)Anthropocene?: A feminist-environmentalist critique', in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*. 1st edn. Routledge, pp. 487–505.
- De Jong, S. (2022) *(Un)Sustainable Lives. Working Papers & Briefings*, University of York. Available at: <https://www.york.ac.uk/igdc/papers/> (Accessed: 10 May 2024).
- Denton, F. (2010) *Climate change vulnerability, impacts, and adaptation: Why does gender matter?* *Gender & Development*, 10(2), pp. 10–20.
- Duffy, A.E. (2018) *Civilising through Cork: Conservationism and la Mission Civilisatrice in French Colonial Algeria*. *Environmental History*, 23(2), pp. 270–292.
- Ekowati, D. et al. (2023) *Untold Climate Stories: Feminist Political Ecology Perspectives on Extractivism, Climate Colonialism and Community Alternatives*. In *Contours of Feminist Political Ecology* (pp. 19–50). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

- Endfield, G. (2017) *Climate and colonialism*. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 9(2), e510.
- Ferdinand, M., Smith, A.P. and Davis, A.Y. (2022) *Decolonial ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean world*. Newark: Polity Press.
- Geisinger, A. (1999) *Sustainable development and the domination of nature: Spreading the seed of the Western ideology of nature*. *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review*, 27, pp. 43–73.
- Guivarch, C., Taconet, N. and Mejean, A. (2021) *Linking climate and inequality*. *IMF*. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/09/climate-change-and-inequality-guivarch-mejean-taconet> (Accessed: 15 May 2024).
- Jenkins, B. (2010) *NGOs in Bangladesh: Are they in a strong position to assist vulnerable people living on low-lying lands to cope with floods?* *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 26(3), pp. 455–466.
- Lugones, M. (2007) *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System*. *Hypatia*, 22(1), pp. 186–219.
- MacGregor, S. (2010) 'Gender and climate change: From impacts to discourses', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 6(2), pp. 223–238.
- Mahmud, T. (1999) *Colonialism and modern constructions of race: A preliminary inquiry*. *University of Miami Law Review*, 53(4), pp. 1219–1246.
- Mbembe, A. (2019) *Necropolitics*. Translated by S. Corcoran. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Memmi, A. (1974) *The coloniser and the colonised*. Translated by H. Greenfeld. London: Souvenir Press.
- Mohanty, C.T. (1984) *Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses*. *Boundary 2*, 12/13, pp. 333–358.
- Nkulu, C. et al. (2018) *Sustainability of artisanal mining of cobalt in DR Congo*. *Nature Sustainability*, 1(9), pp. 495–504.
- Ortar, N. and Ryghaug, M. (2019) *Should all cars be electric by 2025? The electric car debate in Europe*. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 11(7), p. 1868.
- Parasram, A. and Tilley, L. (2018) *Global environmental harm, internal frontiers and indigenous protective ontologies*. In *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics*. 1st edn. Routledge, pp. 302–317.
- Patwary, O. (2012) *Climate change: Drivers of insecurity and the Global South*. Sustainable Security Programme, Oxford Research Group.
- Quijano, A. (2007) *Coloniality and modernity/rationality*. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 21(2–3), pp. 168–178.
- Rutazibwa, O.U. and Shilliam, R. (eds.) (2018) *Routledge handbook of postcolonial politics*. London: Routledge.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Saini, A. (2019) *Superior: The return of race science*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sealey-Huggins, L. (2017) '1.5°C to stay alive: Climate change, imperialism and justice for the Caribbean', *Third World Quarterly*, 38(11), pp. 2444–2463. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1368013

The Colonial Legacy of Climate Vulnerability: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

Written by Georgia Bandey

Singh, N. (2023) *Climate justice in the Global South: Understanding the environmental legacy of colonialism*. *E-International Relations*. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/02/02/climate-justice-in-the-global-south-understanding-the-environmental-legacy-of-colonialism> (Accessed: 10 May 2024).

Sovacool, B.K. (2021) *When subterranean slavery supports sustainability transitions? Power, patriarchy, and child labour in artisanal Congolese cobalt mining*. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 8(1), pp. 271–293.

Spivak, G.C. (1988) *Can the subaltern speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Stoler, A. (1995) *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sultana, F. (2022) *The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality*. *Political Geography*, 99, 102638.

UN Women (2022) *In Focus: International Women's Day*. UN Women – Headquarters. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/03/in-focus-international-womens> (Accessed: 10 May 2024).

UN Women (2022) *Women and Sustainable Development Goals*. Available at: [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2322UN Women Analysis on Women and SDGs.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2322UN%20Women%20Analysis%20on%20Women%20and%20SDGs.pdf) (Accessed: 10 May 2024).

Verma, R. (2014) *Land grabs, power, and gender in East and Southern Africa: So, what's new?* *Feminist Economics*, 20(1), pp. 52–75.

Whyte, K. (2017a) 'Is it colonial déjà vu? Indigenous peoples and climate injustice', in *Humanities for the Environment*. Routledge, pp. 102–119. DOI: 10.4324/9781315642659-15.

Whyte, K. (2017b) *Indigenous climate change studies: Indigenising futures, decolonising the Anthropocene*. *English Language Notes*, 55(1), pp. 153–162.