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Make every day an Earth Day!

Climate Justice

Often, when we think of climate change, we focus on the large-scale, big-picture effects: increasing global temperatures, rising sea levels, extreme weather events. However, we should also acknowledge the consequences it will have on human populations.

"Climate justice" an expression that acknowledges climate change is an inherently social issue that will have varying social, economic, public health, and other impacts on underprivileged populations. "Climate change is happening now and to all of us. No country or community is immune," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "And, as is always the case, the poor and vulnerable are the first to suffer and are the worst hit." In the fight against climate change, we must adopt an intersectional approach and strive to address these inequities head-on.

Intersectionality is defined as the interconnected nature of social categorizations (ex: race, class, and gender), creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. In the context of climate activism, we look at how its effects will be more drastic on underprivileged populations.

In terms of disasters, women and LGBTQ+ community are often most impacted. Mami Mizutori, chief of the U.N. Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), said "Disasters do not affect people equally. In many parts of the world, more women die in disasters than men as a consequence of higher levels of poverty and other forms of discrimination." According to the UN, around 90 percent of the deaths from a deadly 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh were women, and 77 percent of Indonesian victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami were women and children. Discrimination and violence against women and LGBTQ+ community limit their





access to financial and health resources during and after crises, creating an increased risk of harm, from unequal access to health care and resources to a higher risk of sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking, and domestic violence.

Indigenous peoples are some of the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, due to their close relationship with the environment and its resources. Climate change exacerbates the hardships already faced by vulnerable indigenous communities including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination, and unemployment. For example, peoples living in the Arctic region depend on hunting for polar bears, walrus, seals and caribou, herding reindeer, fishing and gathering not only for food to support the local economy, but also as the basis for their cultural and social identity. The change in species and availability of traditional food sources, perceived reduction in weather predictions and the safety of traveling in changing ice and weather conditions, all related to climate change, pose serious challenges to human health and food security.

Climate justice and racial justice are fundamentally interlinked. When we look at the United States, we can see that long-existing racist policies and practices – including residential segregation, unequal educational opportunities, and limited prospects for economic advancement – have led to increased vulnerability of Black people to the impacts of climate change. Black communities are disproportionately located in areas that are physically vulnerable to climate hazards, like hurricanes and flooding and in places that are polluted with toxic waste, leading to negative health effects such as cancer, asthma, degraded cardiac function and high blood pressure. Climate change intensifies these health impacts; for example, higher air temperatures trap air pollutants close to the ground, further reducing air quality and exacerbating existing health issues.

The hardest-hit victims of climate change tend to have a disproportionately lower responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions – those living in the Global South produce fewer emissions per capita than the major polluting countries, concentrated in the Global North. According to Oxfam's report, 'Confronting Carbon Inequality', the richest one percent of the world's population was responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people



who made up the poorest half of humanity from 1990 and 2015, a critical period of unprecedented emissions growth.

In conclusion, climate change is inextricably linked to social justice; disasters will serve to heighten already-existing inequalities. If we wish to tackle issues of climate change, we must also address issues of social justice. Likewise, to achieve true social equality, we must mitigate the impacts of climate change. As Washington Post columnist Sarah Kaplan wrote, "You can't build a just and equitable society on a planet that's been destabilized by human activities [...] Nor can you stop the world from warming without the experience and the expertise of those most affected by it."

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