

Gender equality, the climate crisis and the European Green Deal

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The climate crisis is a feminist issue

The climate crisis is a feminist issue because it results from unequal relations of power through which a small number of corporations and nation-states have profited from environmental breakdown while the majority of people are exposed to its devastating effects. Similar to the COVID-19 crisis, the most disempowered and impoverished have been most affected by environmental harm and the effects of the climate crisis. One of the injustices that has shaped the climate crisis is gender oppression. This unequal relation of power makes women being disproportionately poor, burdened with unpaid work and at risk of gender-based violence, and thus more exposed to the negative effects of the crisis. But not all women are equally vulnerable, as they are an internally diverse group due to other structural injustices such as class, race, or disability. In Europe, it is particularly migrant women, women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, disabled women, and single mothers (and those who fall into more than one group) who experience higher risks of poverty and social exclusion and are thus more exposed to the devastating impacts of climate disasters and other effects of current climate crisis management such as increasing food and energy prices.

Limitations of the European Green Deal: An inadequate response to gender inequality and the climate crisis

The European Green Deal (EGD) is a major climate policy program launched in 2019 by the European Commission, with the aim of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and securing 'sustainable economic growth'. Multiple unions, researchers and climate justice activist have criticised that the EGD is primarily a 'green growth' strategy and provides insufficient funding for reaching its net-zero goals even according to its own calculations. Some have also pointed out that it does not consider gender or other inequalities. A close analysis of the Climate Law, Adaptation Strategy and EU Just Transition Fund from a feminist lens shows that while there are some mentions of existing injustices including gender in its texts, the claim that it is a policy package for a "just and inclusive transition" is a vast overstatement.

While the Climate Law and Adaptation Strategy refer to the problems of food and energy poverty, they do not recognise that this affects older women, single mothers and migrant families disproportionately. Consequently, both initiatives are characterised by an absence of serious political commitments and policies to addressing the underlying causes of these

problems, such as rising food and energy prices as results of liberalised energy markets, low incomes, gender pay gaps, insufficiently insulated housing, and social protection against poverty and job loss. The more recently proposed 'Fit for 55' package with its new Social Climate Fund and revisions of the Energy Efficiency Directive seem to offer more concrete policies for alleviating energy poverty but are still to be adopted.

The EGD overall shows little concern for worker's issues, and women's work in particular. While the Adaptation Strategy notes that there may be possible negative impacts of the climate crisis on working conditions, and mentions the pressure on public health systems, concrete commitments remain absent. For example, the negative effects of frequent climate disasters on workers in public services key to climate adaptation, such as firefighting, water and waste management, and healthcare are not given consideration. Gendered income and wealth inequalities, poor working conditions, and the burden of unpaid work – all of which make women more exposed to the negative effects of the climate crisis as workers and consumers – are not mentioned at all.

The EU Just Transition Fund makes the most explicit claim about promoting gender equality and gives member states the option to use the Fund for investing in child- and elderly-care facilities. However, the funding allocated to the Fund overall is significantly too low to cover even a few of the important options listed, making it unlikely that investments in care facilities will be chosen among many competing policy priorities.

With regards to political decision-making power, the EGD further reveals its narrow understanding of a 'just and inclusive transition'. While trade unions are mentioned indirectly a few times as social partners, their role in negotiating and implementing just transitions is not further specified in the Climate Law, Adaptation Strategy or EU Just Transition Fund. With regards to gender, the only concrete policy is a gender quota for the new Scientific Advisory Board laid out in the Climate Law. The EGD's aim appears to be the preservation of the political status quo, rather than seeking a broader redistribution of political power to working women and other marginalised groups.

What could a feminist just transition look like?

A core assumption of Just Transition frameworks is that worker's wellbeing and environmental protection are not to be traded-off against each other but must be pursued jointly as part of an eco-social transformation. As the ILO's Just Transition Guidelines also recognise, gender inequality must be addressed as part of this too.

Just Transition advocates often distinguish between justice in outcomes (distributive justice) such as safe low-carbon work and social protection against loss of income and poverty, and process (procedural justice) such as extending democratic decision-making power of trade unions and individual citizens. This is a helpful distinction for analysing the shortcomings of existing policies and creating better strategies. But they are not exhaustive as reparative justice is a crucial component of climate justice too which deserves further attention.

Currently there are numerous gendered inequalities in production and consumption which are shaped by the climate crisis. The sectors of energy and health provide two examples:

- The workforce in the energy sector, often the focus of Just Transition debates as decarbonising energy is one of the central challenges of our time, is primarily male. For these workers, access to reskilling, social protection policies and decent 'green jobs' in the renewables sector are an important just transition goal which many trade unions have been campaigning for. More attention should be paid to the consumption side too, where rising prices have been increasing energy poverty which is already affecting women disproportionately.
- Like the energy sector, the health sector also deserves more investment to deal with the climate crisis. Health and social care work, which is likely to increase to deal with climate impacts, is performed by 78% women in Europe, of which the majority are low-earners, and many are migrant women. At the same time, there is evidence that globally more women than men are killed in climate disasters such as droughts, floods and fires. European studies have found that older women are more likely to die in heatwaves. Climate disasters have also been associated with increases in sexual and gender-based violence against women and LGBTQ+ people, who are more likely to suffer from displacement and exclusion from healthcare.

A feminist Just Transition requires ambitious policy commitments beyond what the European Green Deal is currently offering. Public investment to improve jobs in the health and social care sector, gender-based violence prevention and shelters, public child- and elderly care services, social protection against poverty and income loss (including for migrants) are crucial just transition policies to address gender inequalities while reducing carbon emissions and adapting to climate impacts.

Much political debate, campaigning and negotiation will be required at the global, European, national and local level for advancing better policies suited for particular contexts. Important questions for assessing Just Transition strategies with regards to their gender impacts include:

- *How do policies recognise gender oppression and its relationship to the climate crisis, including how it affects women differently depending on inequalities of class, race, disability, or other injustices?*
- *How do policies transform or reinforce the poorer working conditions and opportunities in paid employment experienced by women, and resulting gendered inequalities of income and wealth?*
- *How do policies transform or reinforce the conditions of social reproductive work, especially the gendered division of unpaid and low-paid care work?*
- *How do policies change the distribution of ownership between the public and the private sector, and with what consequences for the working conditions of women?*
- *How do policies address or reinforce structural racism (affecting women of colour), including environmental racism and dependencies of the global South on the global North?*
- *Do political processes move in the direction of democratising decision-making by redistributing power to women, people of colour and other marginalised groups?*
- *How do political processes involve collective actors such as trade unions, climate justice movements and feminist organisations in decision-making?*

Conclusion

Since the climate crisis has affected the most marginalised hardest, progressive policy responses must focus not just on reducing carbon emissions but doing so in a way that also tackles existing gender inequalities, and interrelated structural inequalities such as class, race and disability. The analysis of the Climate Law, Adaptation Strategy and Just Transition Fund showed that the European Green Deal does not recognise these social injustices sufficiently and does not provide concrete policies for addressing them as it is based on a narrow conception of a 'just and inclusive transition'. Since the organisation of employment and unpaid work, the distribution of income, wealth and political power are unequal along gendered lines, a Just Transition must be feminist – in the sense of seeking to abolish these power inequalities at their root through collective action.





EPSU is the **European Federation of Public Service Unions**. It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 250 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI).

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