

Ethical Debates, Gender, Technology and Climate Change

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The last two occasions when I was asked to reflect on climate change were UN related events, one in New York and the other in Rome. The first was a high level expert meeting hosted by UN DESA just before the Bali United Nations Climate Change Conference in December 2007. Held in the basement of the UN it featured familiar stars on UN climate change scene all poised to attend Bali. The other was a 'no global' civil society meeting organized by la via Campesina and its allies held in an alternative university space just before an intergovernmental meeting on the Food Crisis and climate change at the headquarters of the FAO. The ethics of climate change was on the agenda in both meetings, strongly argued from the perspective of the South.

The New York meeting was all about the need to negotiate at government level mitigation and adaptation strategies that did not penalize economic growth in the developing world. The message was to return to a sustainable development based on ecological and economic justice which the experts in the South should lead.

The 'no global' civil society meeting focused on the havoc wrecked by unfettered global capitalism as the cause of the current food and climate crisis. The message of that meeting was that it could no longer be business as usual and to strengthen the campaign for climate justice through a mobilization of those who were suffering the effects most, the very poor in the South.

In both meetings I felt distinctly uneasy. In the first I heard mostly men talking about 'technology', 'the vulnerable', 'pro-poor development' 'experts' 'business leaders; and 'negotiations'. In the second I heard mostly men talking about 'power', 'mobilising', 'local culture' and 'nature'. In neither did I hear anything about gender relations. Certainly no one mentioned feminism. Women if mentioned at all were depicted as the most vulnerable, the poorest of the poor, the landless farmers, the victims.

What worried me the most, however, was that in the UN meeting the only time women were mentioned was in relation to the need to bolster funds for family planning and more efficient population programmes to meet the needs of the poor. The recommendation was that the UN needed to deliver better health and family planning services. Within the liberal US context this could be seen as progressive, reproductive rights talk, but in this climate crisis setting, it did not sound like it. Creeping back was the notion of a world with too many mouths to feed, the planet not being able to bear so many people, that is so many poor people, who are the most vulnerable to climate change.

In the civil society gathering gender or women were not explicitly mentioned but in the European context there was enthusiastic talk about the need to reject the urban car

culture, super markets, consumerism and for a return to local food production and local care of the environment. Given current gender roles, going back to the local food production and land use, I suspected, implied a return to back breaking work for women as they cared for the family, house, husband, children and land without energy and environmentally damaging modern amenities or what some might call 'conveniences'. A nice romantic picture of traditional culture and nature that hid a gender blindness of the different working roles women and men play and quite frankly a naivety about the role technology plays in our lives.

So there are three ethical questions to raise here: One is how to confront a possible reemergence of 'The Malthus Factor' in population policy. The second is how to ensure that nuanced and aware gender analysis is brought into the climate change and climate justice debate. And the third, the role of technology.

Eric Ross writing on 'The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development' for *Corner House Briefing 20* first published July 2000 raises some important issues that brings out some of the difficulties we face in Europe today in our fight to keep sexual and reproductive rights and health on the agenda.

He argues that it is only when resources are equitably apportioned will we be able to move beyond the Malthusian politics of population to a consideration of human reproductive rights and needs. In the meantime, the ideas of a "population problem" and a "tragedy of the commons" will be constantly mobilized. The illusion that the poor's economic and reproductive behaviour is the source of their misery, and that development or 'economic growth' is their only source of hope, will continue to be propagated.

Such arguments obscure the economic, cultural, political and social complexities behind reproductive choices. As Rosalind Petchesky, a key activist and writer in this field states, how can a woman:

"avail herself of [reproductive] right if she lacks the financial resources to pay for reproductive health services or the transport to get to them; if she is illiterate or given no information in a language she understands; if her workplace is contaminated with pollutants that have an adverse effect on pregnancy; or if she is harassed by parents, a husband or in-laws who will abuse or beat her if they find out she uses birth control."

US based teacher and activist, Betsy Hartmann also points to the persistence of neo-Malthusianism and the dangerous intersections between it and the conservative assault on immigrants, women of colour and the economically poor in general within the climate change debate.

The environmental degradation narratives link population pressure to poverty and destruction of the environment now leading to climate change. The simplistic neo-Malthusian assumption is that as poor people grow in numbers they start to destroy their environment in an effort to survive and then as the environment fails to sustain them, they move on to even more marginal environments, and destroy them as well. This leads to a vicious cycle of poverty, environmental degradation, migration and rising violence and

conflict over natural resources. The focus on poor peasants does not take into account other powerful social, economic and social forces responsible for poverty, environmental degradation and conflict. Malthusianism fails to differentiate types of rural poverty and their relationship to environmental change and have a one-dimensional view of migration. There is little evidence that migration is mainly due to demographic pressure. Women are given a negative role in relation to population growth, as breeders of environmental destruction, poverty and violence, and controlling their fertility becomes the magic bullet solution.

What we have to guard against in the Climate Change debate is the fears of 'over population' reemerging in popular thinking, obscuring the structural and systemic roots of poverty, inequality and environmental deterioration. Current debates about globalization, welfare, the minimum wage and migration continue to be influenced by Malthusian arguments which reaffirm the privileges of the few over the hopes of the many.

We need to be very aware as we fight for women's rights for sexual and reproductive choice in our different European states that we do not fall into a neo Malthusian trap. We need to be very clear that sexual and reproductive rights and health is linked to fundamental inequalities that are evident within Europe and outside Europe, and to ensure that women living in Europe or anywhere in the world are entitled to the same rights, economic, social and political.

It is crucial that in the climate change debates we bring in nuanced and strategic gender analysis that is neither misogynist nor romantic about the gendered roles women play. We cannot afford to paint poor women simply as the vulnerable victims of climate change: such as the depiction of Tsunami female victims drowning because of their inability to swim, bodies found wrapped in traditional clothing. Nor should we try to just reverse the stereotype of women as strong community leaders who can organize emergency relief more efficiently than men. The truth is far more complex. Yes women are usually more vulnerable to climate crisis for a whole host of gender based oppressions, and probably they are efficient at organizing relief when they can utilize resources but the issue is to work with the gender differences and design supportive, transformative shifts for the behaviour of both women and men. Such a response requires major institutional and structural changes that supports community survival building and decreases gender inequalities without recourse to stereotyping or blaming the victim mentality.

Pragmatically the discussion on climate change needs to be used to get down to brass tacks on ways to ensure gender equality.

But we are not just talking about protecting the rights and resources of very poor communities in the Global South. We also need to talk about what is going on in the Global North. And here I really want to get out of romance and into some tough problems we all face.

But I do not mean romantic returns to local food production, cutting out all technological innovation. Technology is in our lives to stay, in ways we need to understand not fear nor pretend we can ignore.

In relation to reproductive technologies it is important to look more closely at the political, ethical and cultural consequences of new bio technologies. What are the responsibilities of companies, scientists, policy makers, the public in the Global North towards poor women and men in the Global South who are bearing the brunt of some of the unregulated and unethical practices of biotechnological research and industry? How can we craft a gender analysis on the nexus between new technologies and the global economy, environment and reproductive politics? We need to glean more information on the effects of biotechnologies on women's bodies and the environment as well as take seriously a broader global responsibility to reframe the debate.

For example, the new areas of 'human performance enhancement' and 'transhumanism' point to scenarios of a dramatically different future where traits and human capabilities can be 'improved' and perfected through technology. 'Enhancement' directly relates to body politics and issues around biological reproduction. There will not only be huge ethical dilemmas around whether to manipulate one's body further through these new technologies, but also whether to allow or force this onto one's children. We can imagine some frightening scenarios for future parents: Should one stay 'natural' and lose out or join the enhancement trend? Is it 'fair' to prevent one's children from succeeding as well in school as their enhanced friends and schoolmates?

We need to ask questions about increasingly evasive genetic technology as well as the underlying racism and eugenics in some of these practices. What is the drive behind the industrial and medical interest in these technologies as well as querying the 'choice mantra' leading to genetic manipulation, designer babies and so forth, as well as the 'virtual holocaust of girls' in Asia where access to sonograms and amniocentesis has allowed families to carry male foetuses to term and terminate female ones.

Already, major concerns are being raised about the toxicity of nanoparticles and their impact on both health and the environment. Advocates of synthetic biology are hailing the promises of new, constructed photosynthesising and CO² absorbing bacteria as solutions to the climate crisis, while others see incredibly dangerous possibilities for disturbing ecosystems. This new technology will have dramatic implications for women both directly and indirectly.

The issue is how to ensure participation, engagement and political action that will shape the impact of such technologies in ways that promote methodologies and applications that do not misuse or negatively impact on women, men or nature.