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## **Gender equity and care for transformative climate justice**

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### **Introduction: The intersectionality of transformative climate justice**

As global climate change is destabilising lives and worsening inequities and disparities in Ireland and around the world (Deubelli & Mechler, 2021; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022), climate justice is emerging as an urgent global policy priority (Kashwan, 2021; Newell et al., 2021; Robinson, 2018). Climate justice, an approach to climate action that goes beyond the technological emphasis on decarbonisation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, focuses attention on the intersectionality of the social, economic, and institutional changes that link technological change with societal transformation by centring social justice and economic equity (Stephens, 2022; Sultana, 2022). Transformative climate justice recognises that the climate crisis is a horrible symptom of extractive and exploitative systems (Sultana, 2025). A transformative climate justice approach calls for systemic and structural changes acknowledging that the climate crisis is not a scientific problem that

can be fixed with technological solutions (Newell et al., 2021). Transformative climate justice also links climate vulnerabilities with the societal risks and geopolitical dangers associated with increased social instability, migration and growing inequities (Harlan et al., 2015; Stephens, 2020).

Transformative climate justice embraces a feminist and decolonial approach to redressing the legacy of economic injustices, gender inequities, extractive labour practices, housing insecurity and systems of exploitation that are worsening climate vulnerabilities (Kuhl et al., 2024; Sultana, 2025). Climate justice prioritises transformative economic investments, social policies and innovative practices that are based on human dignity, equity and care. Climate justice is intentional and explicit on the necessity to disrupt the status quo financial and political systems that continue to marginalise people and communities by concentrating wealth and power among those individuals and organisations that are already privileged (Newell et al., 2021; Schapper, 2018; Sultana, 2022; Whitaker, 2021). The rapidly growing global climate justice movement, based on feminist principles, has been, and continues to be, led by women (Robinson, 2018).

Patriarchal systems have reinforced and perpetuated the assumption that investing in technological innovation will enable humanity to control the climate, while minimising the potential of investing in social innovation, social justice and social change. Transformative change requires a collective moving away from these dominant patriarchal discourses toward a feminist and intersectional perspective that integrates care and gender equality.

This paper reviews why a feminist climate justice approach focused on gender equity and care is essential for the transformative societal changes that are urgently needed for a more healthy, just and stable future for all. The paper first describes why and how feminist climate justice is a necessary response to climate isolationism. Then, it describes why the integration of care and gender equity into climate policy is fundamental and how care is a feminist concern. Next, examples of intersections of care and climate within the Irish context are provided, followed by a concluding discussion on moving toward transformative climate justice.

## **Feminist climate justice as a response to climate isolationism**

Feminist climate justice has emerged in response to the ineffectiveness of male-dominated technological optimism that continues to prioritise

investments in technological innovation rather than social innovation. The prevalent focus on technology evolves from assumptions of patriarchal white-male conceptions of privilege and power that evolve from a colonising and controlling mindset (Stephens, 2023).

Despite over thirty years of international climate-policy efforts, societal responses to the climate crisis have been inadequate and ineffective, while exacerbating injustices and inequities (Stephens, 2020). Feminist principles and priorities have been notably absent from mainstream climate-policy research; a systemic review shows a lack of gender research and a disconnect with feminist theories (Alonso-Elpelde et al., 2024). While just transition research integrates feminist principles and consideration of gender equity and care, a systemic review of supply chain management literature shows extremely limited mention of feminist theories or gender (Karaosman et al., 2025). Beyond climate-policy research, the practice and implementation of climate policy also fails to integrate gender equity, care and feminist principles. In Ireland – and in many places around the world – a narrow focus on individual climate mitigation actions and technological fixes distracts climate policy from considering gender equity and care, and prevents a more systemic, feminist, community-based collective approach to climate policy that prioritises societal change.

Feminist theorists have created the term ‘malestream’ to refer to situations where research is based on male perspectives and then assumed that it applies to everyone (Guy-Evans, 2023). The individual and technological focus of mainstream (and malestream) climate action is based on traditionally masculine priorities of control and domination. Many climate initiatives, priorities, policies and investments have focused narrowly on technological innovation to meet goals of emission reductions and decarbonisation without considering gender equity and care. As the climate crisis worsens, it is becoming increasingly clear that many of these actions have exacerbated, rather than improved gender inequities and climate injustices (Stephens, 2022).

A key contributor to the insufficient actions taken so far toward a more just, healthy and stable future is the fact that climate decision-making has been all-too-often constrained within a male-dominated, narrow technocratic lens sometimes referred to as ‘climate isolationism’ (Stephens, 2022). Understanding the gendered nature of ‘climate isolationism’, helps to explain how gender and climate justice are linked.

Male-dominated climate isolationism refers to the narrow technocratic lens that is prevalent in decision-making around both climate mitigation and climate adaptation. When climate isolationism is applied to climate mitigation, decarbonisation is usually the goal (Geels et al., 2017), carbon accounting is the primary metric, and incentives and costs of a variety of different mitigating technologies are often projected and compared (Auel & Cassady, 2016). When climate isolationism is applied to climate adaptation, a disproportionate focus on investing in technical infrastructure (i.e. sea walls and drought resistant crops) often detracts attention and investment from social innovation and social changes that could enhance climate resilience (Rodima-Taylor et al., 2012).

The narrowness of climate isolationism excludes intersectional perspectives and results in limited opportunities for people to connect and engage (Peterson et al., 2015). The technocratic focus limits public discourse because it excludes people for whom abstract, scientific terms or the technological details may not be meaningful – thus it makes the challenge seem distant and unapproachable (Stephens, 2020). The technocratic way of speaking about the climate crisis has limited resonance with many people because it does not relate directly to their values and the choices they have control over in their daily lives. Not only does this very technical way of discussing climate change resonate with only a small subgroup of society, it also often projects the need for sacrifice and hardship rather than highlighting benefits and opportunities (Peeters et al., 2019). Climate isolationism is also exclusive because many proposed technological ‘solutions’ are also expensive and perceived as options that are only accessible to the rich (Biermann & Möller, 2019). Driving a Tesla electric vehicle, for example, is not an option for most people, so the focus on this technological innovation results in many people feeling disempowered and disengaged (Stephens & Surprise, 2020).

The narrow mainstream focus on mitigating climate change has also centred individual actions to bring about change. Irish climate policy has adopted this individualistic approach to make change by providing incentives for individuals to change their own lifestyles and their own households. This approach of providing incentives for individuals to purchase electric cars and/or install solar panels, for example, distracts from larger scale policies that are providing subsidies to large multinational corporations that are causing ongoing climate damage. The Irish Government’s policies that have incentivised the rapid growth of data centres demonstrates how the

narrow climate-policy focus on individuals results in counter-productive policy misalignment away from large-scale polluters; this approach is preventing Ireland from achieving its legally binding carbon budgets (Climate Change Advisory Council, 2024). To be effective in achieving the level and scale of change that is required, climate-policy needs to refocus on restricting large-scale polluters and providing support to build capacity within communities to develop localised approaches (Oxfam International, 2024).

### **Integrating care and gender equality**

Care and gender equality are intertwined, and a feminist intersectional approach acknowledges that the lives of all human beings depend on both giving and receiving care and support. Care is intrinsic to how society functions and involves the provision of a wide range of different kinds of support and assistance. Care and support are fundamental in many different contexts and relationships, including within the home, family and the broader community, and across different groups of individuals, including children and young people, people with disabilities, older persons, and many others, in different ways and at different times. Care for the environment and non-human species is also fundamental to humanity, yet the importance of care continues to be systemically disregarded and undervalued in capitalist, neoliberal hegemonic policy discourses (Lynch, 2021).

Care and support work, both paid and unpaid, is disproportionately carried out by women, and valuing this work is crucial for addressing gender inequalities and advancing climate justice. In Ireland, women spend on average 21.3 hours per week on unpaid care work in comparison to 10.6 hours per week for men (Russell et al., 2019).

In Irish society, the crisis in care is central to women's inequality, with under-resourcing, lack of adequate provision, accessibility issues, and moves towards commodification and corporatisation affecting almost all aspects of care and support provision. The commodification of home-care services has led to an expansion of private providers that are profit-driven.

### **Recognising care: A feminist priority**

Care work – whether it is unpaid care work in the home, or in the formal sector taking place in nursing homes, hospitals and the homes

of those who need specialised care – is essential work. Human societies and economies rely on care to continue existing, despite the fact that unpaid care work in the home is generally not given economic value in neoliberal economics. Care work is also gendered work, which has traditionally been seen as women's work despite advances in gender equality, particularly women's rights to work outside of the home and improving paternal leave. For women with children to be able to take up full-time employment, childcare services are a necessity – but in Ireland, the majority of care services are privatised, with 70 per cent of childcare services and 85 per cent of older person's services delivered through private, for-profit entities (Dukelow et al., 2024). Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe, with one-third of a woman's median full-time earnings being used on childcare in 2019 (Doorley et al., 2023). These costs rise in lower-income family households, particularly lone parent households, and for those with less paid maternal employment. High childcare costs have been cited as an outright barrier to women's participation in the labour market, which has been preventing child poverty rates from improving (Doorley et al., 2023). The number of people providing unpaid care in Ireland has risen from 4 per cent of the population in 2016 to 6 per cent in 2022, and Ireland has the highest reliance on unpaid care work in the European Union – most of it being unpaid childcare (Dukelow et al., 2024).

The same economic system which relies on the provision of care devalues unpaid care work in the home and in the community. The neoliberal marketised and financialised economy tends to characterise care work as an infinite resource available to produce workers to continue unending economic growth, and the marketised economy treats nature and our natural resources in a similar way. The current economic system based on false assumptions of infinite growth and unlimited extraction is proving to be incompatible with a liveable planet (Hickel, 2024).

The gendered inequality inherent in care work has implications for women's experience of the climate crisis and how society responds in Ireland and beyond. Gender inequality persists in Ireland; gender pay and pension gaps stand at 9.6 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2022) and 36 per cent (Irish Life, 2024), respectively. This is a result of the cumulative inequalities across a woman's life cycle from gender segregation in education, participation in employment, absence of supports in childrearing years and absence of adequate pensions in older years. Women continue to bear a greater share of care responsibilities and carry out twice as much unpaid caring work in the

home compared to men (Russell et al., 2019). This creates economic disadvantages that reduce the capacity of women to respond to climate impacts. The gap in economic, social and political participation created by caring inequalities, particularly barriers to taking up full-time employment, means that women are also less able to afford green adaptation technologies such as electric vehicles or retrofitting. In addition, the low levels of representation of women in Ireland (e.g. in 2024 women made up 23 per cent of local government representatives and 26 per cent in national parliament) further constrains the integration of gender and care into decision-making spaces in climate-policy-making at all levels. Irish climate policy pays attention to gender when discussing climate impacts for women in developing and frontline countries, but attention to gender inequities in a domestic context is entirely absent. This means that actions to transition the Irish economy and population to net-zero emissions lack recognition of existing gender inequalities and, therefore, climate policy is exacerbating rather than reducing these inequities.

### **Intersections of climate and care**

Relationships among gender equity, care and the climate crisis are well developed in international research and empirically evident in places throughout the world. Oxfam in its report centring ‘care work in climate action’ refers to the need to address climate change in a manner sensitive to care dynamics and it adopts a ‘5R Framework’ which articulates the need ‘to recognise care work, reduce care work, redistribute care work, represent care workers and reward care work’ (MacGregor et al., 2022). While research and data in an Irish context is minimal with regard to climate change and care, a new partnership with the National Women’s Council and Community Work Ireland created Feminist Communities for Climate Justice and the project’s baseline data report *Feminist Climate Justice Report* by Dukelow et al. establishes the core connections between care and climate change from an Irish perspective (Dukelow et al., 2024). In her book on *Care and Capitalism*, Kathleen Lynch, Irish sociologist and activist, links climate and care by identifying the multiple ways that humans care for parts of the earth’s systems beyond the human (Lynch, 2021). The work of Mary Murphy, another Irish sociologist and activist who has developed a vision for post-growth eco-social futures, also links care and climate by inspiring the co-creation of new imaginaries and coalition-building that includes reciprocity and interdependence, universal basic services and participation income (Murphy, 2023).

The intersection of climate and care involves recognising that the climate crisis has multiple complex ramifications for how humans care for each other. For example, unpredictable weather increases the challenges of growing food, creating volatile price increases as supply chains are impacted; flooding and storms can destroy homes and infrastructure, which can upend the provision of shelter, warmth and care in an instant; and unseasonal, extreme heat and cold have impacts for health, which can add to the workload already involved in caregiving. Caregiving creates unique and gendered uses of energy and transport, two sectors which will be transformed in the energy transition in Ireland. Women's energy use for caring work is far more likely to take place in the home, where it is immediately billable, compared to men's energy use – for women who are in full-time employment and also carrying out care work in the home, the resulting 'time squeeze' can lead to more intense resource use to carry out household and care work (Dukelow et al., 2024). Caring work also creates gendered uses of transport, with public and active modes of transport having poor compatibility with caring work and transportation systems overall being designed for a typical male breadwinner home-work commute alone (Dukelow et al., 2024). The 'mobility of care' – transport use tied to care – is the primary reason for women's travel in Ireland, particularly dropping off or picking up children. Seventy-nine per cent of women living in Dublin, which boasts Ireland's best public transport infrastructure, find using a car a necessity to carry out their transport needs, with this figure jumping to 95 per cent outside of the capital (Cahill et al., 2020). This need has implications for Ireland's transport goals tied to its legally binding emission reductions targets, with government hoping to move 50 per cent of journeys currently taken by private car to public or active transport by 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2024).

Despite this, care and caring work remain largely unnamed and invisible in Ireland's climate policies. This means that the impacts that climate change will have on care work, as well as how the government's adaptation and mitigation responses will impact on care work – and therefore, on women – go entirely unaddressed in Ireland's climate strategy to reach net-zero by 2050.

## **Changing policy and political context for climate and care**

In 2025, the Irish policy and legislative landscape for both climate and care is shifting with a new *Programme for Government: Securing*



*Ireland's Future* agreed by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Independents in January 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2025). The programme sets out the framework for policy, legislation and service delivery and the direction for the government's actions over the next five years, with a commitment for five budgets ending in late 2029. This timeframe will be a critical period for assessing the government's progress in tackling the climate crisis through international and domestic climate and environment commitments under the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. This presents an important opportunity to integrate a care and climate analysis (Stephens, 2025).

The 2025 *Programme for Government* (Government of Ireland, 2025). is set out in twelve substantive sections: 'Growing our economy'; 'Delivery and reform'; 'Accelerating housing supply'; 'Protecting our environment'; 'Investing in our future'; 'A caring society'; 'Thriving communities'; 'Safe and secure communities'; 'Enriching our society and culture'; 'Ireland's place in the world'; 'Political reform'; and 'Functioning of government'. In 2025, it seems clear that 'Growing our economy' – a section which includes enterprise and employment, public finances, tourism, agriculture and food, and fisheries and the marine – is the priority for many in government. This section comes ahead of sections dedicated to social infrastructure such as care and support, housing supply, and climate and environmental action. By contrast, the 2020 *Programme for Government* (Government of Ireland, 2020) had 'A better quality of life for all' as its first substantive mission; though 'Reigniting and renewing the economy' came second.

As a statement of priority and intent for the new government, this is concerning. This is not because the need to ensure stable and effective public finances is not important, but rather because of the missed opportunity where the new government could have laid down a marker about the kind of Ireland they want to build – one which focuses on care and support, public service provision, gender and social equality, and real and radical action on climate and the environment.

There are positive commitments in the *Programme for Government* for advancing care and climate (e.g. a commitment to develop state-led early childhood education and care facilities is a step towards a public system, commitments to increase supports for carers, and meeting our 2030 climate goals). Given the urgency of tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, and the need for a new eco-social model, the absence of commitments to structural reform and

rights-based services in economic and social policy are disappointingly evident throughout the programme. In addition, the gendered aspects of these crises and the specific solutions needed for women are ignored and not mentioned. While the *Programme for Government* re-commits the government to the legally required 2030 targets, the climate and biodiversity crises are not identified as a key driver for policy change (Stephens, 2025). Without effective, sustainable, inclusive and gender-sensitive climate and environment solutions in transport, energy, housing and across government departments, women will continue to be disproportionately impacted by our changing climate and the destruction of the environment. The lack of integration of feminist priorities in the current government also means that a narrow climate isolationist approach to meeting the climate targets is being perpetuated. This means that Ireland's climate policies are likely to continue to be inadequate and insufficient while also exacerbating inequities and worsening disparities. Ireland is not on track to meet its legally mandated emissions targets, although the fines associated with not meeting these targets will be extremely disruptive.

Unfortunately, the 2025 *Programme for Government* does not signify a shift in the government's approach to care and support as vital parts of our economic and social model. The structural change that is needed as set out in this article, where the value of care and support is understood as central to our social, economic and environmental model in the future, and is demonstrated through our policies and services is largely absent from the government road map for the next four years.

As Ireland navigates the economic and geopolitical disruptions of the Trump administration in the United States of America, a commitment to gender equity and care in the government's approach to climate policy would provide the Irish Government a distinct and appropriate alternative vision to the destructive and harmful 'petro-masculinity' of United States policy (Daggett, 2018). Petro-masculinity is a term developed by energy sociologist Cara Daggett to describe how promoting fossil fuels is often equated with sexual domination and assumptions of controlling both women and ecological systems. During this time of cruelty and disruption, Ireland could demonstrate global leadership by adopting feminist climate-justice priorities into a new economic model (Stephens & Kelly, 2024).

The rapidly changing political and policy landscape points to the need for a greater understanding of how climate and care policies need to be integrated to deliver both sustainable approaches to the

climate crisis and transformative change towards a more equal and just society for all (Stephens & Kelly, 2024).

### **Prioritising care in climate policy**

Integrating care and care work into climate policy offers a number of benefits to the net-zero transition. Caring jobs such as teaching, community work and social care are all low-carbon-emitting jobs, producing twenty-six times less greenhouse gas emissions than typical manufacturing jobs and over 200 times less emissions than jobs in agriculture (Dukelow et al., 2024). However, Irish climate policy and discourse on green jobs centres on male-dominated fields like renewable energy, retrofitting and recycling. This means that caring jobs are not afforded the attention and value that they rightfully deserve in the transition to a green economy in Ireland. Caring jobs are not included even though employment in caring jobs would fulfil the triple roles of improving employment, improving gender equality and meeting climate change targets due to its low-carbon nature. Investing in care would be three times less polluting per job created than jobs created in the construction industry (Dukelow et al., 2024).

Care work, despite being essential and green work, remains dominated by an overworked, underpaid and largely female workforce with poor or non-existent organisation and rights to bargaining. The precarity of so many care workers represents another reason why women are more vulnerable to the impacts of the ongoing climate crisis. In addition, because care work in Ireland and in the Global North is predominately provided by migrant women, demand for care work in the Global North is exacerbating a crisis of care in the Global South as families are separated and the care infrastructure is disrupted.

The lack of integration of care into climate policy emerges from a deep cultural and epistemic practice of devaluing care work among researchers, policymakers and many climate activists. Within academic work on climate, the silence on normative aspects of care contributes to the disregard for the potential of integrating care into climate discourse and climate policy. The lack of attention to relationality and relational knowledge in academic work has been recognised by many as a critical factor contributing to the inadequate responses to the polycrisis facing humanity (Stephens, 2024; West et al., 2020). This acknowledgement has also led to multiple calls for a relational response to transformative change embracing a care-based

approach (Moriggi et al., 2020). Given the blatant cruelty and the hostile attitude toward care and care work being perpetuated with the rise of authoritarian leaders, Ireland has unique potential for care-based climate leadership given the strong culture association with compassion, empathy and social justice (Stephens & Kelly, 2024).

### **The power of transformative climate justice**

A paradigm shift toward climate justice requires acknowledging that:

- Feminist priorities and integrating care into climate policy is necessary for the transformative changes that are needed.
- Many policies, processes and practices that benefit wealthy people, nations and established institutions are the drivers of climate change.
- The impacts of climate disruptions and the capacity to adapt are distributed unequally among and within local and global communities with a distinct yet often ignored gendered component.
- Equitable climate adaptation and strengthening climate resilience require new transformative investments, innovations and actions to rectify the disproportionate burdens on those who are most vulnerable to ongoing and future climate impacts.

Climate justice action thus involves striving for transformative systemic changes that integrate technological and social innovation while prioritising social, racial and economic justice as well as relational justice and gender equity. Integrating care and care work into climate policy operationalises relational justice by countering the mainstream underestimation of the role of affective relations of love, care and solidarity in generating injustices in the production of people in their humanity (Lynch et al., 2021).

Climate justice focuses simultaneously on the inequities associated with both the root causes and the impacts of climate change (Robinson & Shine, 2018; White-Newsome, 2016). Climate justice focuses on addressing the underlying causes and extent to which frontline and underinvested-in communities and those who have been historically oppressed face disproportionate impacts of both climate change and fossil fuel pollution. Climate justice aspires to 'fair treatment of all people and [seeking] to rectify the environmental burdens posed by discriminatory policies and systems, and by climate

change itself' (Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2016; Moore & Russell, 2011). There is clear unethical injustice in the fact that the emissions-generating activities predominately by a privileged few result in life-changing burdens of the impacts of a changing climate experienced by the many (Bell, 2013; Timmons Roberts, 2009). Robinson has suggested that climate justice means very simply to put 'people at the heart of the solution' (Robinson, 2018). The concept of climate justice has been used to frame understanding of the benefits and burdens of greenhouse gas mitigation, responsibility and capacity to respond to climate change, and how to minimise the burden of adaptation on the world's most vulnerable (Jenkins, 2018).

### **Conclusions: Leveraging Ireland's potential for care-centred climate justice leadership**

Despite Ireland's ambitious climate commitments and its unique potential to be a global leader in climate justice, a significant shift in Ireland's climate policy is urgently needed to achieve this potential. A climate justice paradigm shift in climate discourse and climate policy in Ireland that centres gender equity and care is a clear path to move towards a transformative agenda. This must involve the inclusion of women with expertise in climate justice, care and gender equality in central decision-making and policy fora.

The climate crisis is a symptom of a socio-economic system that is in need of transformative change – and the island of Ireland has unique potential to lead on that transformation because of the prospect of constitutional change and unification. It is increasingly recognised that in addition to climate instability, the current system is also worsening economic inequities and widening health disparities. Climate instability is also causing increasingly precarious access to stable housing, nutritious food, quality education and healthcare. Because women and marginalised communities are disproportionately impacted, public investment and support for meeting the needs of the most vulnerable people is essential. Systemic change toward transformative climate justice requires all policy areas – and any constitutional change – to prioritise gender equity and care.

The inclusion of women with a care-centred climate justice lens is largely absent from climate decision-making spaces, policies and action plans developed by the state. Even in Ireland's newly developed Just Transition Commission whose membership was formed in late 2024, people with feminist care-centred climate justice perspectives

were not selected to serve. Similarly a care-centred climate justice approach must become a central part of policies and initiatives that are developing long-term strategic direction goals for the development of our society. For example, the work to develop all-island policies in the Oireachtas and the Shared Island Initiative under the Department of the Taoiseach and in civil society must also consider the future of the island from a care and climate-justice perspective. In all discussions about the future of the island of Ireland, shared responsibility for protecting the land, sea, air and biodiversity is essential.

If Ireland does not embrace a care-based approach, it is likely to remain a laggard within the European Union in terms of climate-policy implementation. To date, Ireland has been ineffective in achieving its climate targets because of both policy misalignment and prioritisation of corporate interests over the public good. From energy to agriculture, from expanding data centres to intensifying meat and dairy production, Ireland is not on track to meet its emissions targets because policies continue to incentivise carbon-intensive growth and private-sector profits rather than investing in the needs of communities. The individualistic approach to incentivising change at the household level has proven to be ineffective and inadequate. But by prioritising gender equity and care in Ireland's climate policy, Ireland could become a climate justice leader.

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