

## Climate justice, gender and COVID-19 in the Caribbean

Guest blog for the “Caribbean Voices for Climate Justice” series by Ayesha Constable, GirlsCARE

October 12, 2021

The impacts of climate change on the Caribbean are well documented. There is an extensive body of academic literature and reports highlighting the risks to physical infrastructure, productive sectors and key foreign exchange earning industries, such as tourism. These risks pose long-term threats to the development of the countries of the region, particularly as small island developing states (SIDs) with a range of geographic and economic issues which heighten our vulnerability to climate change.

Across the region, governments have made significant strides to address the climate crisis by developing policy and legislative support for climate action through National Climate Policies, outlining steps to adapt and build national resilience through the development of National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and proposing ambitious targets for adaptation and mitigation in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Though commendable, many of these plans and policies fail to address critical variables that are at the root of the climate crisis in countries across the region – systemic national and global inequities which must be addressed to achieve climate justice.

Global economic disparities, which have their roots in early economic models built on exploitation via extractive industries based in resource rich countries in the Global South and on cheap and readily available supplies of labour, are the basis of contemporary challenges. Caribbean countries have historically been disadvantaged and as former colonies have a range of factors that contribute to their vulnerability to climate change. This **global divide is the archetype of climate justice as rich countries continue to ‘colonize the atmosphere’ while poorer countries, such as those in the Caribbean, remain highly vulnerable with the least resources to adapt.**

At the national and sub-national levels, the **disparity is further demonstrated across different demographic groups based on access to resources and power, including young women and girls.**



Mentees from the 1st cohort of young women trained in the GirlsCARE Climate Change Mentorship Programme. Credit: Aaliyah Noble, Zola Hinds, Norrishia Morally

While young women and girls across the region have become the face of the climate activism movement, this demographic remains one of the most vulnerable. Their vulnerability to the physical risks of climate change is heightened by the socio-cultural and systemic challenges that exclude them from decision-making, heighten the likelihood of loss of income and threaten their physical safety and security. Such risks are a further indication of the injustices at play in the climate crisis and the gender disparities that besiege our societies. Other vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities and members of the LGBTQI+ community are also often left out of the conversation on climate change and justice. This omission needs to be redressed as a matter of urgency to create equity and shift the balance of power to those most marginalized in our societies.

GirlsCARE, a mentorship programme for female climate activists in the Caribbean, stemmed from the recognition of the need for a safe space to help young women step into the world of climate activism in the Caribbean. It was born from the need for more young women from the Caribbean to have access and participate in national and global processes such as the Conference and Parties (COP) of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change. GirlsCARE was a response to the founders' experiences in climate spaces where matters related to race and place dictated the platforms provided and representation of your experiences and voice. GirlsCARE was founded on the principles of climate justice and gender justice. Through the interactions and opportunities provided by this programme, it has become increasingly evident that **climate justice as a concept in climate governance in the Caribbean is yet to be fully embraced, and it must be interwoven into all the dialogue on climate change.**

One of the many topics addressed in the recently concluded GirlsCARE programme, was the question of whether or not the COVID-19 pandemic is a *dress rehearsal for climate change*. While many have rubbished the notion, an analysis through intersectional feminist lens reveals many parallels that should be considered. Similar to the climate crisis, COVID-19 has gendered and social dimensions that characterize its impacts across different age groups, gender and social classes. It has demonstrated how socio-economic disparities at the global, regional and national levels exacerbate the impacts. This is a clear reminder that **if we are to address climate change, and enable COVID-19 recovery that supports a just and resilient transition, the matter of social and gender gaps must be addressed as a matter of priority.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for accurate and accessible information to inform public decision-making, similar to what is needed for individual climate action. Similarly, the policy measures taken by government are in line with what is required legislatively to bar actions that drive climate change. In addition, the disparity in access to vaccines by rich and poor countries is analogous to the access to climate finance and technology. If the vaccine scenario serves as a blueprint for the climate experience, then we ought to be very concerned. It is safe to say that measured bilateral support or negotiations will not secure the resources required to build Caribbean country's resilience to climate change. At some point, the esoteric response to the climate crisis, like that of COVID-19, from a standpoint of diplomacy and consensus, must give way to fairness, equity and justice.

About Ayesha Constable:



Ayesha Constable is a climate researcher and practitioner who applies a feminist approach to her work as a scholar activist. She is co-founder of GirlsCARE and founder of [Young People for Action on Climate Change Jamaica](#).

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<http://ayshaconstable.blogspot.com/>