

# Female Resilience, Climate Injustice and Sustainable Development

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Robinson, Mary. 2018. *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

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## Pascoal Teófilo Carvalho Gonçalves

As a researcher of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda, my reading of the book was motivated by and will be reviewed based on those references. I then warn the purely academic reader: the book does not deal with concepts; it is not a theoretical book. It tells the author's practical experience in several international forums and the struggle of local leaders around the globe to minimize the effects of climate change.

The idea that lends the book its title, climate justice, is introduced in the first chapter and is much more intuitive than actually “conceptual”: all human beings already are affected by climate change, but the poor are affected much more intensely and pay a much higher price. Those who contribute the least to climate change are penalized first and that is unfair.

Bearing that in mind, where is the book situated? Its use of the concept of

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climate justice prioritizes the human element of the economic, environmental, and social tripod that underpins sustainable development. In the first chapter, narrated in first person, the author tells how her work with the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights led her to fight for basic rights such as food, drinking water, health, education, and decent work. However, according to her, the climate issue appeared as key on all fronts of this battle.

*[The book's] use of the concept of climate justice prioritizes the human element of the economic, environmental, and social tripod that underpins sustainable development.*

Its focus on the human being and individual action gives the book a somewhat liberal quality. The State, when mentioned, appears instead as a passive agent that responds to the demands of individuals than as an active player that proposes and implements public policies. The author starts from a microsocial perspective and emphasizes local bottom-up development, as conceived by Tenório (2007). I will discuss the implications of this option when commenting on Chapter 8. From a narrative point of

view, the book is particularly successful in emphasizing the human element, using photographs and real stories. The author presents ten women and two men whose lives were affected and who decided to take action. They all became leaders in their communities, and their work was internationally acknowledged.

The cases described in Chapters 2 to 6 discuss: gender – about 70% of the food produced worldwide is cultivated by millions of small family or subsistence farmers in Africa and Asia, the vast majority of whom are women (Chapter 2); gender and race – those affected the most by the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. in 2005 were the poorest and, in particular, African-American women and women from other ethnic groups, who were subsequently denied government aid (Chapter 3); traditional/indigenous communities and their female leaders – indigenous peoples should be protagonists in preserving the environment and in resisting climate change, as they feel the ongoing impact much more intensely than dwellers of large urban centers around the world and have valuable knowledge about nature (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

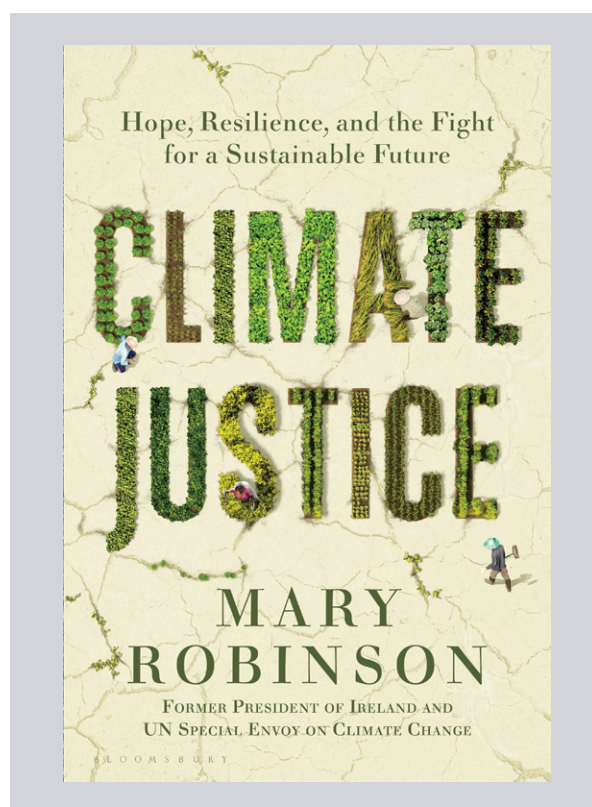
Chapter 7 tells of the inhabitants of the small Pacific Ocean archipelago of Kiribati, the first country in the world that will cease to exist due to rising sea levels. Kiribati's government plans to buy vast tracts of land on Fiji's second-largest island, 1,000 miles away,

and to prepare young people to migrate with dignity. The author could have developed this very important issue (environmental refugees) better. Refugees and immigrants pose far-reaching challenges to national and international agendas, and xenophobia and nationalism already are noticeable in relation to climate change exiles.

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Chapter 8 addresses the change in the standard of living and in consumption in rich countries, in this case, Australia. This is a core issue that I think should have been discussed since Chapter 1. John Robinson's (2004) notion of two currents of thought in the environmental debate provides a useful backdrop against which to read this chapter in particular and the book in general. On the one hand, there are those who favor adjusting the existing development model by uniting economic growth to the rational use of natural resources in the concept of sustainable development. On the other hand, the idea of sustainability is more critical and entails changing the development pattern, and using new values and beliefs to end the anthropocentric cycle.

Throughout the book, Robinson indirectly takes a sustainable development position: we need more technologies (even if they come from indigenous peoples' knowledge) to deal with climate problems. That is particularly disappointing in relation to Chapter 8, which deals with specific changes in the day-to-day actions mainly of women in rich countries and conveys no deep-seated concern with nature and with humankind's place therein. In other words, Chapter 8 does not involve recognizing the limits of nature and the need to adhere to them. On the contrary, sustainability, in this context simply means ensuring the continuity of raw materials for industrial production, the continuous flow of commodities and the endless accumulation of capital (see Waters 2008). The author's



strategy of placing human beings center stage in the narrative loses sight of macro-social/structural elements and misses the opportunity to criticize contemporary capitalism and its values and practices, even if subtly.

Chapter 9 is particularly successful in bringing the issue of work to the table: it addresses the impact the economic transition needed to curb, stabilize and reduce climate change causes on existing jobs in “dirty” industries, such as oil & gas. Chapter 10, the final one in the book, focuses on the Paris Agreement and on its implementation challenges. It describes in general terms the targets and responsibilities defined: limiting global warming to no more than 2°C above pre-industrial temperature; reducing gross greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050; meeting again in five years to present plans to reduce carbon emissions and reporting every five years, beginning in 2023, on progress towards achieving the targets. The book puts great emphasis on the setback Donald Trump’s election represented for international efforts (the then president removed the U.S. from the Agreement) and on the contrast with the rest of the world’s sense of responsibility. The fact that some U.S. cities and states assumed Agreement commitments, despite the federal government’s renegeing on it, is, in my view, the most interesting development of the case.

Finally, some considerations about the scope and limits of the book are in order. Starting with the limits, the author does not mention the 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the UN launched in 2015<sup>1</sup> are fully aligned with Robinson’s (2018) purpose: to unite economic growth with social justice and environmental preservation. Indeed, several SDGs pervade the discussions in the book, such as 1 – No Poverty; 5 – Gender Equality; 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth; 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities; 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production; 13 – Climate Actions; or 17 – Partnerships for the Goals.

As to the book’s merits, I highlight: its emphasis on women as key players affected by climate change and as protagonists in the search for solutions, whether mitigation or adaptation; its emphasis on resilience, which at the same time warns us that time is of the essence and inspires us not to stand still and to act locally to spark global effects; its human character (referred to at the beginning of this review) through its focus on several community leaders with international visibility, which contributes with the international dissemination of ideas and policies (Gilardi 2013) and with international cooperation geared toward the seventeen SDG mentioned above. ■

1. See: <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/91863-agenda-2030-para-o-desenvolvimento-sustentavel>.

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