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Men, masculinities, and climate justice

Katrien Van der Heyden

A summary report of discussions at the 3rd
MenEngage Global Symposium (the Ubuntu
Symposium), 2020-2021



MenEngage Alliance
working with men and boys for gender equality

About the symposium

The 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium represents the most ambitious collective activity that MenEngage Alliance has ever embarked on as an international social change network working to transform patriarchal masculinities and engaging men and boys for gender, social, and climate justice.

The convening (also known as the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) was adapted from plans to meet for three days in person to a seven-month online event. It was an unprecedented journey for the Alliance and for everyone involved: 5,000-plus registered participants from 159 countries and 600-plus speakers involved in 178 global sessions (plus many more at the regional, country, and local levels).

MenEngage Alliance members and partners came together to take stock of the work being done and assess what is needed going forward. The symposium provided space to share experiences, evidence, and insights on how to effectively challenge and dismantle oppressive patriarchal norms and constructions of masculinities; to identify new goals, frontiers, and strategies; and to create a forum to rearticulate a political agenda that seeks to transform unjust and deeply embedded power structures.

The [Ubuntu Declaration & Call to Action](#) is one of the key outcome documents from the symposium.

About MenEngage Alliance

MenEngage Alliance is an international social change network harnessing the collective energies of its members towards ending patriarchal power and supporting women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) rights; and human rights—and achieving gender justice and social justice for all.

The Alliance is a space for organisations to come together, in solidarity with those most targeted by gender injustice and patriarchal systems, to collectively dismantle structural barriers to women's rights and gender equality. As a global network, MenEngage Alliance brings together people and organisations with a shared vision of a world in which gender justice and human rights are recognised, promoted, and protected and in which all people are equal and free from discrimination and oppression.

The mission of MenEngage Alliance is to transform unequal power relations and dismantle patriarchal systems by transforming patriarchal masculinities and rigid, harmful norms around 'being a man'; by working with men and boys on gender justice through intersectional feminist approaches; by building inclusive collaborations from the local to regional to global levels; and by developing joint actions in partnership with and accountable to women's rights, gender justice, and other social justice movements.

As members, and as a collective, the Alliance aims towards a shared vision and mission for positive change and to transform unequal power for the benefit of all.

This paper was authored by Katrien Van der Heyden for MenEngage Global Alliance, with reviews from Vidar Vetterfalk, Stephen Burrell, Danya Marx, Jennifer Rodriguez Bruno, Tom Hornbrook, and Laxman Belbase, and copyediting by Jill Merriman. Design by Sanja Dragojevic based on the Ubuntu Symposium branding by Lulu Kitololo

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For me, the COVID crisis showed that politicians are capable of handling a crisis and listening to scientists. It is a matter of taking it seriously enough and feeling the urgency. The [thing] is, the climate crisis is worse. The climate crisis is way bigger and will affect many more people than the COVID crisis did, so I hope people will remember after COVID what a healthy reaction to a crisis looks like.

— ANUNA DE WEVER VAN DER HEYDEN (YOUNG CLIMATE ADVOCATE),
[MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE](#)

1. Context and problem analysis

While some MenEngage Alliance members had been involved in the climate justice movement for years prior, the Alliance itself explicitly named climate¹ justice as an ‘emerging priority area’ in its 2017–2020 strategic plan.² This new focus has led to several key efforts, including an interactive online workshop in 2020 on the relationships between masculinities and the climate crisis. The 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium (also referred to as the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium) marks another effort to stress the links between masculinities and climate crisis, using a dual-track initiative with seven virtual sessions and a series of workshops for practitioners.

This document aims to consolidate the symposium’s lessons, experiences, and discourses on men, masculinities, and the climate crisis. It is not an exhaustive retelling, but rather a reflection on the views shared during the symposium—by both academics and activists—that could be stepping stones to a broader debate in the future.

Notably, MenEngage Alliance created a new interim working group focused on climate justice and masculinities during the symposium. This working group aims to strengthen the Alliance’s engagement, position, and clarity on climate justice in order to mobilise and work with members and partners, with the goals of deconstructing patriarchal masculinities and creating a climate- and gender-just world. This document could help shape the working group’s—and the Alliance’s—strategic direction in terms of the programmatic, campaign, and policy agenda.

¹ In this paper, ‘climate’ or ‘environment’ refers to all three central problems of today’s natural world: CO₂ emissions, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity.

² MenEngage Alliance. (n.d.). *MenEngage Global Alliance strategic plan 2017–2020*. <http://menengage.org/4451-2/>

1.1. Background

A worldwide wake-up call on climate has been building momentum for decades—even though the potential devastation of CO₂ emissions were documented as far back as the early 19th century and CO₂ concentration measured in the air starting in the 1950s. Despite the warnings—and, increasingly, alarms—most human beings have continued their fossil fuel-based lifestyles unabated, supported by governments and corporations that do not prioritise the environment and promote consumerism as the way to happiness.

In 2009, a detailed follow-up to the famous 1972 report *The Limits to Growth* documented the nine main environmental challenges of our time, revolving around nine planetary boundaries that should not be crossed in order to maintain the planet's health.³ We crossed four of the boundaries set forth in the report by 2015: on climate change, loss of biodiversity, nitrogen and phosphorus flows, and land system change.⁴ Despite knowing the problem exists, and despite the tremendous efforts of feminist and environmental organisations on climate justice, a global response has remained mostly absent. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports have built broad scientific consensus, but their political impact on cutting back emissions has remained limited, and women's voices are hardly heard in such venues.

In 2018, the fight against climate change gained an enormous boost through the School Strike for Climate started by Greta Thunberg in Sweden and followed by millions of students all over the world. A young, mostly female generation is challenging the old, male, and white emblems of power. The gender dimension—more specifically, young women and girls challenging older men—cannot be ignored.

For decades prior to the school strike movement, though, feminist organisations had pointed out the many intersections of gender justice and climate justice and had demonstrated how fighting for human rights means solving the climate crisis in a way that cares for the most affected people and areas. Most women and girls face double injustice due to climate change and gender inequality in all aspects of their lives: women and children are more likely to drown during disasters than men, for example, and more often live in poor conditions that make them more vulnerable during crises.⁵ At the same time, women are more likely to recycle and have on average a smaller ecological footprint than men do.⁶ Gender stereotypes around care are well documented, putting most of the care duties on women and girls' shoulders all over the world—often, including care for nature.

In recent years, MenEngage Alliance members and partners have increasingly realised the importance of engaging on climate justice given its intrinsic connections with gender and social justice issues, most importantly from the systems change perspective.⁷ The realisation has grown among members that MenEngage should contribute to the climate justice discourse with the men and masculinities lens, as well as support and build activism inspired by the work of feminist gender and climate activists. Increasing recognition of the connections between

³ The nine planetary limits are biodiversity loss and extinctions, chemical pollution and the release of novel entities, climate change, ocean acidification, freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle, land system change, nitrogen and phosphorus flows to the biosphere and oceans, atmospheric aerosol loading, and stratospheric ozone depletion. See: Stockholm Resilience Centre. (n.d.). *The nine planetary boundaries*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

⁴ Steffen, W., Richardson, K., Rockström, J., Cornell, S. E., Fetzer, I., Bennett, E. M., Biggs, R., Carpenter, S. R., De Vries, W., De Wit, C. A., Folke, C., Gerten, D., Heinke, J., Mace, G. M., Persson, L. M., Ramanathan, V., Rayers, B., & Sörlin, S. (2015). Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science*, 347(6223). <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1259855>

⁵ Syazwani, H. A. F., Hafizah, S. N., & Noraida, E. (2016). *Women, gender, and disaster: A case study of flood victims in Kota Bharu, Kelantan*. http://eprints.usm.my/31296/1/Farah_Syazwani_Hayrol_Aziz1.pdf; also see: Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I., & Wisner, B. (2004). *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters* (2nd ed.). Routledge; UN WomenWatch. (2009). *Women, gender equality and climate change*. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf

⁶ Bloodhart, B., & Swim, J. K. (2020). Sustainability and consumption: What's gender got to do with it? *Journal of Social Issues*, 76(1), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12370>

⁷ 'Systems change' refers to the realisation among activists that the problems humanity is facing cannot be solved by quick fixes that leave the ground rules in place; rather, the current neoliberal system inherently creates these problems and thus needs to be fundamentally replaced by another system. Often, this new system is called the transition economy, the circular economy, degrowth, or the doughnut economy. See: Hayworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. Random House; Hickey, J. (2021). *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world*. Windmill Books.

climate and human rights is also happening at the intergovernmental level. For example, the United Nations Human Rights Council recently appointed a special rapporteur on human rights within the context of climate change, marking a critical moment in addressing this intersection.⁸

1.2. Basic concepts

Martin Hultman and Paul M. Pulé achieved a major milestone in their 2018 work *Ecological Masculinities*, developing a theoretical framework for masculinities and climate justice; the authors further explored their theory in the 2021 book *Men, Masculinities, and Earth*.⁹ The authors developed a typology of three major constructions of masculinities related to the environment, which was referred to often for much of the symposium discussion:

- **Industrial/breadwinner masculinities** view ‘mankind’ to be the pinnacle of nature, having the distinct objective of dominating, exploiting, and pushing for exponential growth. Within industrial capitalism, many (mostly Western/Global North) cultures have been dominated by this form of masculinities—an embodiment of patriarchy, with its norms and values leaving the planet polluted, destroyed, and depleted while creating structural inequalities that leave millions in poverty. Often, industrial/breadwinner masculinities result in climate denialism and climate delay rhetoric.¹⁰
- **Eco-modern masculinities** are firmly rooted in industrial/breadwinner norms associated with masculinities, but they ‘greenwash’¹¹ by claiming technological solutions will fix all environmental problems without needing a systems change or questioning the patriarchal norms and values that produce the neoliberal capitalist system and its devastating planetary impact. Climate delayers can be found in this group: aware of climate problems, but trying more of the same old patriarchal recipe to fix them. These masculinities can sometimes be found in a military context.
- **Eco-logical masculinities** are shaped by a systemic transformation of how we view men and boys’ place in their environment, upending men’s dominant position and firmly placing them within the intricate lacework of all life on Earth.

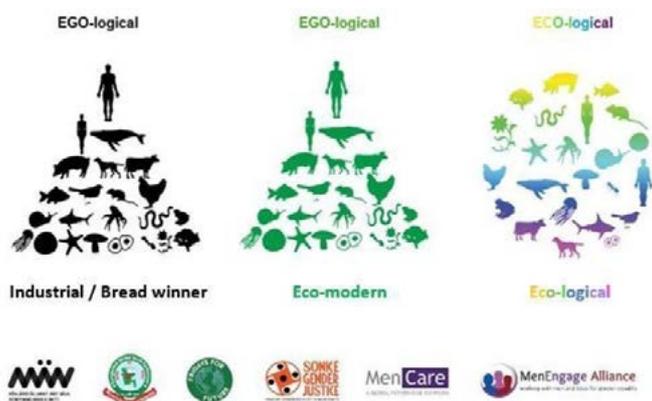


Figure 1: The relationship between masculinities and nature (SOURCE: Unknown for the original two black images of EGO and ECO; colours and three categories added by Vidar Vetterfalk, Martin Hultman, and Paul M. Pulé)

⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2021, October 8). *Human Rights Council appoints a Special Rapporteur on the protection of human rights in the context of climate change and a Special Rapporteur to monitor the situation of human rights in Burundi*. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=27639&LangID=E>

⁹ Hultman, M., & Pulé, P. M. (2018). *Ecological masculinities: Theoretical foundations and practical guidance*. Routledge; Pulé, P. M., & Hultman, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Men, masculinities, and Earth: Contending with the (m)Anthropocene*. Springer Nature.

¹⁰ ‘Climate denialism’ refers to people denying the overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is taking place due to human CO₂ production in the atmosphere. ‘Climate delayers’ are those who agree that the human production of CO₂ does affect the atmosphere but who cast doubt on the urgency and gravity of its impact. Both climate deniers and climate delayers are part of a larger strategy (funded by the fossil fuel industry) to cast doubt and, thereby, delay when fossil fuel production needs to end.

¹¹ ‘Greenwashing’ includes actions taken to fight the climate crisis but that only have a symbolic impact, existing to convince the public that something is being done and to provide companies with ecological branding when they continue to harm the climate.

As Vidar Vetterfalk of MÄN said during [Voices From Women and Girls Leading the Feminist Climate Justice Movement](#):

Industrial/breadwinner and eco-modern masculinities are built on an EGO-logical order based on scarcity, telling people they have to buy more and more to stay happy, whereas in reality, true love and intimacy [are] prevalent in the ECO-logical order. It is abundant and for free. Thirty seconds of looking into somebody's eyes is life-changing. And it is for free. The same with nature: when you stop seeing it as an object that is there for consumption, that is revolutionary. It is not about moving back to the Stone Age; it is about moving forward to a world that is much richer than what we have right now.

During the symposium sessions on men, masculinities, and climate justice, presenters shared that the deconstruction of patriarchal gender stereotypes implies we will ultimately move beyond binary gender roles and transcend eco-logical masculinities towards an eco-logical humanity. Thus, the typology serves only as a framework to understand the current situation, not as an agenda for future actions.

As such, the climate crisis and gender inequality can be viewed as mere symptoms of a disease. The disease is patriarchy, together with other systems of oppression, like capitalism and colonialism. From a climate justice perspective, addressing the root causes of the climate crisis also requires tackling social inequalities and eradicating forms of oppression that movements can also reproduce, including gender inequalities. By focusing on curing the disease, we get to the root problems that connect movements: we cannot attain gender equality without tackling the climate crisis, and vice versa.



2. Promising practices and examples



Climate crisis is not only an environmental or development issue. It is an economical issue with global politics. It is also [a] human rights and youth issue, so we young people need to have a say in this. As young people, we have the obligation to protect our future and present. We young people in Bangladesh feel abandoned by the international community. We are unheard, but not voiceless.

— SOHANUR RAHMAN (YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVIST),
[MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE \(PART 2\)](#)

Feminist and eco-feminist organisations have developed numerous practices that engage women and girls in the environmental movement. However, practices working with men on environmental topics from a transforming masculinities perspective are much less common. This section highlights some of the existing programmes and projects addressing men and masculinities that were discussed during *Masculinity and Climate Change* ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), which were about good practice examples.



PHOTO CREDIT: Sandor Szmuto / Shutterstock.com

2.1. Sweden: Men in the Climate Crisis

In 2019, Swedish MenEngage Alliance member [MÄN](#) worked in close collaboration with Chalmers University of Technology and the permaculture garden Under Tallarna to develop a prototype tool for men's reflective groups addressing gender transformation within the context of the climate crisis. [Men in the Climate Crisis](#), which has been pilot-tested in Sweden and translated into English and Russian, involves practising active listening as a central methodology and is meant to come after the first four sessions of MÄN's [reflective #aftermetoo group sessions](#). *Men in the Climate Crisis* is based on the theory and practice developed in two books: *Ecological Masculinities* and *Coming Back to Life*.¹² Research based on in-depth interviews with participants has shown promising results.¹³

The experiential work—based on *Coming Back to Life* and the concept of 'active hope'—follows a spiral sequence flowing through four stages: gratitude, honouring our pain for the world, seeing with fresh eyes, and going forth. When working with men and boys, it is crucial to focus on changing masculine norms about difficult emotions: going from ignoring these emotions to learning not to shy away from them. Then, men must learn to connect with and relate to the existential challenges we now face, feeling how much they care and finding the deep motivation, longing, strength, creativity, and love needed to create systems change. The authors of *Coming Back to Life* call this 'active hope': we care and love no matter how big the challenges are. By contrast, passive hope involves caring from a distance, with our level of hope based on a calculation of how likely something is to succeed.



Men in the Climate Crisis guide
(SOURCE: MÄN)

¹² Hultman, M., & Pulé, P. M. (2018). *Ecological masculinities: Theoretical foundations and practical guidance*. Routledge; Macy, J., & Brown, M. Y. (2014). *Coming back to life: The guide to the work that reconnects*. New Society Publishers.

¹³ Hedenqvist, R. (2020). *Exploring ecological masculinities praxes: A qualitative study of Global Northern men who have participated in pro-feminist and pro-environmental reflective groups* [Master's thesis]. Stockholm University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?fbclid=IwAR2zt1puF55dcjNPZwSOKY1GjAOIh6VxwLbklBhFWnla9RM6rrkLNI81POi&pid=diva2%3A1450738&dswid=3588>

2.2. Russia: Center ANNA and men’s discussion groups

Since 2016, [Center ANNA](#) in Russia has held an annual photo exhibition, ‘Papino Delo’ (‘Papa’s Business’), which is dedicated to 20 fathers photographed doing activities with their children. In 2019, the centre chose to present images of fathers and children involved in nature protection, asking fathers: ‘What kind of environment would you like to bequeath to your children?’ The deeply moving portraits were shown in several Russian cities, including Moscow, where the photographs were placed on billboards in the largest city park.

A male psychologist in Astrakhan, Russia, implemented another notable initiative ending in September 2021. The initiative involved two men’s discussion groups, with each group holding eight meetings to talk about nonviolence; these meetings often evolved into discussions on what it means to be a man acting in the world without detachment and aggression. For some men, it was difficult to talk about responsibility to oneself, one’s loved ones, and the future since these topics involve feelings that are usually hidden in nontherapeutic conversation groups, such as anger and shame. The conversational jumping-off point for some men was detachment: participants willingly discussed men’s detached attitude towards their health, towards their bodies, and consequently, towards women and nature. The ideas of an unaggressive, empathic attitude towards oneself and towards women helped the men to discuss environmental problems. The initiative’s success has led to plans to implement it with businesses going forward.



SOURCE: Center ANNA photo exhibition



2.3. Bangladesh: Coastal Youth Action Hub

In Bangladesh, the *Fridays For Future* movement has merged with the work of gender equality activists, deeply embedding both climate justice and gender justice topics into all their actions. By refusing to treat these topics as separate, climate and gender activists are reinforcing their call for systems change.

The Bangladesh Fridays For Future movement has set up a *Coastal Youth Action Hub* as an activist vehicle. The action hub is a space for the co-creation and knowledge management of youth-developed innovations and solutions, and it envisages three angles of work:

- Enhancing access to knowledge and resources (capacity-building, mentoring, fellowship, idea incubation, digital platform)
- Research, advocacy, and campaigning (study/action research, movement-building, advocacy, campaign, youth parliament)
- Linking local to global actions (mapping youth organisations database, networking, solidarity)

Its action plan involves a study circle on climate change, monthly district meetings, a newsletter, a social media campaign, social audits of climate projects, and youth capacity-building.



3. Men, masculinities, and climate justice (by Ubuntu theme)

This section discusses men, masculinities, and climate justice within the context of the five overarching symposium themes to advance the work on transforming patriarchal masculinities and on working with men and boys on gender equality and social justice. These themes include feminisms, intersectionality, accountability, 'power with', and transformation.

3.1. Feminisms



We feel so much pain precisely because we are so connected to the Earth. Grief is connection. Disruption of binaries also opens up space to have a wider and deeper understanding of the world. It creates space for eco-feminism.

— MARNA HAUK (ACADEMIC), [MEN, MASCULINITIES AND EARTH](#)

Even before the wider population became aware of the climate crisis, feminist movements were already applying a power and gender analysis of systems of oppression, domination, and extraction. Eco-feminist theory, research, and movements have highlighted oppression by patriarchal structures and by men in power, as well as the situation of many (often marginalised) women and girls in relation to environmental problems. However, eco-feminism also looks at women and girls' resilience, courage, and creativity in healing the planet. As Greta Gaard said during [Men, Masculinities and Earth](#): 'If we genuinely want to create an environmental culture and a shift, we need to make more conscious choices about the gendered lenses through which we view environmental actions.'

At the same time, men and boys must contribute to the creation of a gender-equitable and ecologically sustainable society. However, feminist climate movements have not yet addressed, analysed, or integrated the inherent potential of working with men and boys as part of the solution or explored their contribution to the problem in depth. Addressing the climate crisis, gender equity, (and the interconnections of the two) is labour that women should not and cannot shoulder alone. However, as Kézha Hatier-Riess, vice president of external relations at Global Greengrants Fund, said during [The Climate Crisis, Men and Climate Justice](#), the traditional framing of empowerment in virtually every society expects women to be the main participants in gender equality actions and asks them to take on the unequal systems alone. Also, when it comes to gender in climate issues, the lens is most often on women and girls as ‘victims’ or ‘heroes’ on the front lines of climate change. Men and masculinities’ destructive or positive role in creating change remains invisible.

The often feminist and lesbian leadership of the youth climate movement (e.g., Fridays For Future) is no coincidence. These girls and women have already struggled on other fronts (e.g., LGBTBIQ rights and mental health activism) and used the lessons learned in climate movements.¹⁴

3.2. Intersectionality

“ **The climate crisis is not neutral to rich and poor; the climate crisis is not neutral to women and men. The climate crisis is not neutral to Global North and Global South. MAPA—most affected people and areas—need priority. Climate crisis finance is not charity. It is compensation. It is justice.**

— SOHANUR RAHMAN (YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVIST),
[MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE \(PART 2\)](#)

Solutions to the climate crisis can never be one-size-fits-all since its impact on people’s lives varies profoundly depending on socioeconomic status, race, gender, and other aspects of identity. Indeed, diversity exists not just among humans but also when we expand our lens to include the natural world (e.g., plants and nonhuman animals). As Greta Gaard said during [Men, Masculinities and Earth](#):

Family doesn’t have to be by blood, and it doesn’t have to be humans. Kin-centrism, nature is family. We are family to nature; we are family to other species. It is not that nature is our family—it is that we are all family, and science catches up with that.

This diversity brings richness to our discussions but can also lead to privilege and/or discrimination, including in terms of gender. Most often, masculinities create privileges in

¹⁴ De Wever, A., Neubauer, L., & van der Heyden, K. (2020). Fridays For Future – FFF Europe and beyond. In C. Henry, J. Rockström, & N. Stern (Eds.), *Standing up for a sustainable world*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

a person's life and femininities create discrimination—including in terms of the mechanisms leading to the climate crisis and its paths to a solution (e.g., resilience and mitigation). Other structures of oppression—such as in terms of race and socioeconomic status—also require an intersectional perspective to ensure work is not complicit with colonial systems. For example, wealthier men and men in the Global North contribute much more to climate destruction relative to poorer men in the Global South.

Too often, we have a tendency to speak for others. Intersectionality does not only mean acknowledging intersectionality and privilege in terms of pain inflicted by the environmental crisis. It also means passing the microphone to the most affected people and areas. For example, one speaker discussed geo-scientific speculation during *Men, Masculinities and Earth* and how ideas are typically proposed by Western men with a heavy 'superman' complex about carrying the world on their shoulders and saving humanity. Concepts hailed in a Global North context as the key to systems change—like degrowth¹⁵—might translate to increased poverty among those already stripped of privilege in the Global South. So, the challenge is to interrogate the concept of 'degrowth', define what it means in Global South contexts, and understand how it can connect to development in a way that achieves well-being for all.



Sohanur Rahman (young climate activist) speaking at "Voices from women and girls leading the feminist climate justice movement"

¹⁵ See: Hickel, J. (2020). *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world*. William Heinemann.

3.3. Accountability

“ [The] youth climate movement is extremely successful in touching the emotions of the ‘elite men’ and by making them realise they really have a responsibility. It is a collective action of holding them accountable, which is very important.

— MARTIN HULTMAN (ACADEMIC), [VOICES FROM WOMEN AND GIRLS LEADING THE FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT](#)

The origin of the climate crisis is well known and directly connected to the exponential development of the fossil fuel industry and to related industries. Male dominance and patriarchal norms in the fossil fuel sector are rarely studied or used as a strategic argument in the public discourse. A handful of fossil fuel companies account for the majority of CO₂ emissions,¹⁶ but they avoid accountability through tactics like spreading misinformation and doubt (well documented in the documentary *Merchants of Doubt*¹⁷), delaying, and lobbying for legislation that guarantees they can act with impunity. Thus, accountability is needed for many diverse groups—first and foremost, on a systemic level, fossil fuel and polluting industries and also governments and policymakers; both groups are also male-dominated. On an individual level, though, consumers all over the planet must be accountable, particularly those in the Global North, given their larger contribution to the climate crisis.

Governments and big business have long been happy to push the narrative that it is individual consumers’ sole responsibility to tackle the climate crisis. While individual actions are important, the only real solution is a dramatic political shift and changing the systems in place now—especially of finance, energy, transportation, industry, and agriculture. Only some people—often Indigenous peoples—choose not to take part in these destructive lifestyles, and these Indigenous peoples end up being the first victims of devastating environmental disasters of all kinds.

Fossil fuel and polluting industries are not only based on industrial/breadwinner masculinities or eco-modern masculinities. They also take these industries’ premise to their logical extreme by producing ‘Island Kings’, as it is fashionable among super-rich men to buy an island and a super-yacht to alienate themselves from the rest of humanity.¹⁸ Sherilyn MacGregor and Matthew Paterson describe typical attributes of these ‘kings’ as including extreme wealth; impunity from human and natural laws; feeling justified in domination over that which is owned (land and people); separation, isolation, and detachment; arrogance and wilful ignorance; and the pursuit and assumption of invulnerability.

However, their islands are prone to flooding, too. Disasters can change the relationship men have with the environment, confronting them with their own fragility. Disaster recovery can be a stimulus to develop new caring and responsible ways of relating to and behaving with others and nature. However, there are few studies on masculinities and male experiences with regards to the climate crisis, and the feeling of being invincible is often part of elite men’s inflated identity and needs to be deconstructed.

¹⁶ Climate Accountability Institute. (n.d.) *Carbon majors*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://climateaccountability.org/carbonmajors.html>

¹⁷ Kenner, R. (Director). (2014). *Merchants of doubt* [Film]. Participant.

¹⁸ MacGregor, S., & Paterson, M. (2021). Island kings: Imperial masculinity and climate fragilities. In P. M. Pulé & M. Hultman (Eds.), *Men, masculinities, and Earth* (pp. 153–168). Palgrave Macmillan.

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, accountability is needed now. However, research in Europe shows that women are more concerned about the climate crisis than men are,¹⁹ and the same might be true for Global South countries. As a 2016 MenEngage climate paper stated:

Gender socialization at the individual level, where boys and young men are often taught to be assertive, unfeeling, and unafraid, and girls and young women are taught to be passive and emotionally caring (particularly towards their families), may also impact how men and women view and respond to climate change in general.²⁰

The challenge in working on men, masculinities, and climate justice is not only to raise awareness among men and boys about the climate crisis. It is also to explore what it means to be accountable and to hold others accountable.

3.4. 'Power with'



To feel part of something simply makes it harder to dominate and easier to care.

— ROBIN HEDENQVIST, RESEARCHER, MENENGAGE FEMINIST
[ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE, GENERATION EQUALITY FORA](#)

The politics of male power centred around domination lies at the heart of most environmental crises. Transforming dominance into a caring interconnectedness is key in any attempt to move beyond patriarchy. Wessel van den Berg of Sonke Gender Justice (as quoted by Vidar Vetterfalk of MÄN) noted, 'Caring about something means you can see it and that you are willing to pay attention to it. Give care, receive care.'

'Power with' means ensuring women and girls' voices, agendas, and leadership are heard, not silenced or intimidated. Online and offline harassment of female climate activists is an enormous problem, and men must use their role as allies to ensure safety, provide assistance, fight impunity, and stand in solidarity with these girls and women. It means not only stopping any harassment but also making space for women to have their voices heard in all decision-making bodies, especially at the United Nations level (such as at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), but also nationally and locally.

The environment and climate crises can no longer be left to politicians and environmental organisations to solve. All movements, including the gender equality movement, need to contribute their diverse perspectives. Joint effort—versus working in silos—will also be more effective at achieving the just and sustainable world we are all striving for.

¹⁹ Pederby, T. (2019). *Cool dudes in Europe: Climate change denial amongst conservative 'white' men (Bachelor's paper)*. Lunds Universitet. <http://up.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8975790>

²⁰ MenEngage Alliance. (2016). *Men, masculinities & climate change: A discussion paper*. <http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Men-Masculinities-and-Climate-Change-FINAL.pdf>

3.5. Transformation

“ **We need to be radical dreamers and radical listeners. We need to dare to move into uncomfortable places to make things move in the right direction.**

— MARCELO SALAZAR (HEALTH IN HARMONY EXECUTIVE COORDINATOR IN BRAZIL AND AMAZON RAINFOREST CLIMATE ACTIVIST), [MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE](#)

When looking at environmental destruction, we too often focus on the symptoms without looking at the root causes: neoliberal capitalism based on patriarchy and patriarchal norms, colonialism, and racism. The climate crisis is not the problem—it is a symptom. This narrative must be deconstructed, and more caring humanity built in its stead. As such, transformation means a radical systems change.

For systemic shifts to take place, we must transform the very structures that underlie our economic, political, and legal decisions and institutions. Kézha Hatier-Riess of Global Greengrants Fund said during [MenEngage Feminist Action for Climate Justice, Generation Equality Fora](#):

Some of the strongest environmental ‘wins’ globally have been brought about by social movements that started as small, unseen efforts and grew over time. The tipping points are often hard to predict, but the origins of social shifts are often small and localised.

Thus, the ‘glocal’ perspective (global connection and local action) is key to any transformation and is the scale of our ambition. Climate activism involves the metaphorical ‘small room’ and ‘big room’ (concepts developed by MÄN).²¹ The ‘small room’ involves self-reflection (e.g., openness, experience, individual, gut/emotion, ‘I and you’), and the ‘big room’ involves understanding society (e.g., critique, theory, structure, head/reason). Patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and power reside in both rooms. To create change means listening and supporting on the individual level and being critical and demanding on the structural level. For example, individuals can be encouraged to recycle, but structures and systems must be in place to encourage recycling

²¹ MÄN. (n.d.). #aftermetoo: Reflective groups for men. <https://mfj.se/assets/documents/english/reflective-groups-guide-man.pdf>

and ensure recycling systems are effective.

Another key element is deconstructing hegemonic masculinities and femininities, moving beyond these binaries. Even that human perspective is too limited, though, to facilitate the environmental transformation needed to create a balanced human presence on this planet. Inclusion that reaches beyond humans to include other species and nature itself is vital. We must recognise and be accountable for violence against nature and other species, and a legal framework on ecocide is the first step.

Transformation also means changes on a linguistic level. Too often, concepts proliferate without any thought about how they facilitate or impede the desired change or inclusivity. Warlike rhetoric in response to these crises (e.g., 'fighting climate change' or 'beating the disease') has a militaristic and masculine imprint. The language used in our movements should be much more caring: solving versus beating, healing versus fighting.

Additionally, responses to the climate crisis are often blocked or paralysed by gender stereotypes, such as men refusing to take eco-friendly actions because they are not perceived as 'manly'.²² These efforts also face gendered blowback, like the online and physical backlash against the powerful messages of next-generation eco-leaders such as Greta Thunberg. Indeed, youth voices and intergenerational aspects are often as overlooked as gender aspects in climate justice movements—yet these younger generations will bear the brunt of the crisis without being responsible for its cause. This means climate-related discourse must be inclusive of all generations to come, including the current ones.

Additionally, the climate crisis has already had a devastating impact on the most affected people and areas, but its impact will grow and be felt in all areas of the planet, now and in the near future. Global solidarity is the foundation of any resilience-building.



Anuna de Wever van der Heyden (young climate activist) speaking at Masculinity and climate change

²² Brough, A. R., & Wilkie, J. E. B. (2017, December 26). Men resist green behavior as unmanly. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/men-resist-green-behavior-as-unmanly/>

4. Recommendations

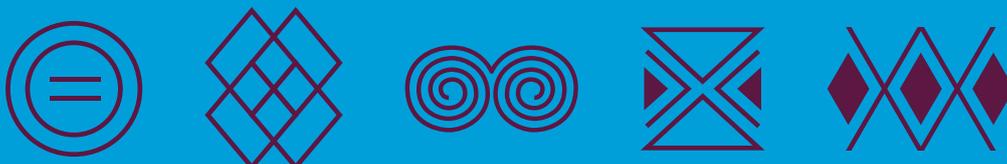
“National political leaders, scientists, writers, public figures—typically white men in privileged, powerful positions—came to help us, young climate girls. That is quite unique; it means a transformation is possible. Also, Indigenous people linked up with us because they heard us speaking the same language. It is a common fight that should unite all.

— ANUNA DE WEVER VAN DER HEYDEN (YOUNG CLIMATE ACTIVIST),
MASCULINITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

As practitioners, we can jointly build a globally just world in which systemic change transforms our planet into a place of inclusiveness and natural richness. To achieve this, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with all those who are not voiceless, but as yet unheard. Overshadowed by patriarchal norms and values, many people—mostly women and girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people—suffer the consequences of various destructive masculinities that urgently need to be held accountable and deconstructed. This calls not only for a deep ecological transformation but also for a clear position of solidarity, setting privileges aside unless they can be used as a responsible call to action.

There will not be any climate justice without gender justice, and vice versa. Developing a caring humanity is central to achieving goals in climate justice and in other domains, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence prevention. Without seeing these topics' interconnectedness, we cannot make progress. In this context, care also means creating safe spaces for men to be vulnerable and to learn how to care for themselves, their communities, and the planet. This glocal perspective needs to be present in all our actions.

The following recommendations—centred around key objectives—can help us to collectively achieve a world that fosters both climate justice and gender justice.



4.1. Feminisms

Objective: Listen to and learn from feminist, youth, and climate justice movements and act together as allies; deconstruct industrial and eco-modern masculinities and construct an inclusive, caring humanity.

Recommendations:

- **Advocate for systems change as allies in diverse feminist movements and institutions,** such as in relevant United Nations bodies.
- **Promote education on feminist climate justice concepts.** Within this, the role of industrial and eco-modern masculinities and patriarchal structures must be made visible as a cause of climate problems.
- **Carry out gender-transformative work with men and boys on how to relate and behave in ways that can help achieve gender equality and climate justice.** This includes making meaningful connections between rational and emotional journeys in solving the climate crisis, as well as learning to heal and deal with eco-anxiety.
- **Encourage further empirical research, quantitative and qualitative, to develop relevant concepts and theory.** Diverse theories must be allowed to grow and change, and a community of practice must be built to develop the topic of masculinities and climate justice.
- **Challenge and deconstruct the idealisation of hegemonic masculinities based on dominance.** This includes, for example, being hunters or looking at hunting as a rite of passage.

4.2. Intersectionality

Objective: Be inclusive of all humans and nonhumans in our work, breaking the male-female gender binary and the human-nature binary; work to deconstruct other systems of oppressive power, like colonialism, racism, classism, and ageism.

Recommendations:

- **Develop an intersectional perspective on all genders and across all themes.** This requires deconstructing patriarchal masculinities into caring humanities and redefining relationships with other species to replace ownership with relationships and an ethic of care for all. It also means looking beyond the myopia of a Global North worldview and decolonizing work.
- **Pass the microphone to the most affected people and areas and amplify their voices, especially women and girls and LGBTIQ people.**
- **Develop climate responses that centre human rights and gender equality.** Refuse to partake in actions that are not in line with global justice movements.



PHOTO CREDIT: Carolina Jaramillo / Shutterstock.com

4.3. Accountability

Objective: Contribute to justice (in relation to climate, gender, and human rights) while simultaneously being accountable to those leading climate justice efforts.

Recommendations:

- **Be accountable to women, girls, and LGBTIQ people, as well as to feminist and youth climate movements.** Whenever possible and welcome, men should use their privilege to assist climate justice movements, and they should be accountable for harm done in the past and present.
- **Hold men in power, corporations, and governments accountable for their responsibilities to tackle climate change.** If need be, prosecute men who are guilty of planetary destruction or ecocide through their activities. Make their harm visible while making the link with patriarchal norms and values clear.
- **Hold those accountable who are harassing activist women, girls, and LGBTIQ people in person and online and help build safe spaces that allow for constructive dialogue.**
- **Ensure climate finance is analysed from the lens of the historically most polluting countries being held accountable to the most affected countries, people, and areas—not as aid.** It should be compensation for loss and damage due to the climate crisis.

4.4. 'Power with'

Objective: Conduct cross-movement-building for shared causes.

Recommendation:

- **Build democratic structures and shift power to those who are unheard, prioritising safety, care, and solidarity.** Those not belonging to the most affected people and areas should refuse to participate in venues or events where these individuals are underrepresented. Additionally, those belonging to the most affected people and areas should be able to decide if they want to speak for themselves or if they want others to use their privilege to raise sensitive issues for them.

4.5 Transformation

Objective: Demand systems change, which helps stay connected to the other movements and avoid tokenistic responses.

Recommendations:

- **Demand feminist systems change and do not become sidetracked by solutions that delay or spread doubt or false solutions.** This requires recognising inadequate solutions to climate change or gender justice and insisting on serious, meaningful action that involves a just and equitable transition.
- **Address the personal, political, and glocal (global connection and local action) concurrently,** addressing the emotional and rational in a balanced way and ensuring transformation is owned by all humans affected and is inclusive. Work on the glocal scale can involve financing small-scale, community-led, sustainable projects focused on adaptation and resilience, as well as co-creating solutions.
- **Demand policy change and address alarming global trends head-on with a sense of urgency.** This can include, for example, demanding energy and resource democracy and making sharing and equality central. Tax havens and financial flow towards elite men should be dismantled, and societies should unite behind the technical and human sciences, listening to scientists and disseminating knowledge to the grassroots.
- **Support Earth rights,** helping build legal frameworks that end impunity for ecocide and securing increased land rights for women and Indigenous people.
- **Change language on climate crisis** to avoid masculine or militaristic language (e.g., fight, battle, or tackle) and instead use constructive, inclusive language (e.g., building, inviting, and connecting).
- **Promote local and traditional knowledge in climate solutions.**

Annex 1. Links to symposium sessions on men, masculinities and climate justice

1. 10 November 2020: [Opening plenary](#)
2. 11 November 2020: [Youth Leadership and Movement Building panel](#)
3. 11 November 2020: [Intersectional Feminist Movement Voices panel](#)
4. 11 November 2020: [Men and Masculinities panel \(part 1\)](#)
5. 12 November 2020: [Men and Masculinities panel \(part 2\)](#)
6. 10 December 2020: [Voices From Women and Girls Leading the Feminist Climate Justice Movement](#)
7. 25 February 2021: [Men, Masculinities and Earth: Contending with the \(m\)Anthropocene](#)
8. 11 March 2021: [Challenges and Opportunities for Building Resilient, Sustainable Communities](#)
9. 1 April 2021: [Masculinity and Climate Change: Good Practice Examples of Men as Allies of Women in Fighting Climate Change](#)
10. 29 April 2021: Masculinity and Climate Change: [Good Practice Examples of Men as Allies of Women in Fighting Climate Change \(Part 2\)](#)
11. 6 May 2021: [MenEngage Feminist Action for Climate Justice, Generation Equality Fora. Practical Work With Men](#)
12. 3 June 2021: [Summarizing the Highlights from the Series and Establishment of a MenEngage Working Group for Climate Justice](#)



MenEngage
UBUNTU
SYMPOSIUM
I AM
BECAUSE
You are

