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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Climate Shocks and Gendered Political Transformation: How Crises Alter Women's Political Representation

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In 2019, visible, "rapid onset" climate-related disasters displaced roughly 24.9 million people, with more than 143 million anticipated to be internally displaced by 2050 in Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer 2020). Not only can climate change induce migration, but, I argue, climate shocks—which I define as discrete, *unanticipated* destruction due to weather such as floods, drought, or windstorms—can also destabilize gendered social systems. Climate shocks can initiate political transformations that open new space for women in representative politics. Additionally, they can compel women to mobilize—as representatives and their supporters—to redirect local and national political agendas to respond to the vulnerabilities exposed by climate shocks.

I develop theory based on the case of South Asia, a region with high climate-induced out-migration and strong patriarchal norms. Mainstream patriarchal norms designate male control over the relations of production—economic, social, and political—within the family, and states reproduce these gendered relationships in public (Brulé and Gaikwad 2021). The default form of political organization is one of "family-centered political coordination" in which senior men leverage control over economic resources to accrue political information, networks, and influence as political representatives of the household (Prillaman 2021). Absent policy interventions, women's voices are often missing or ignored in crucial political negotiations, where women are considered to be passively represented by male family members (Brulé 2020). South Asia thus provides a prototype of the process through which climate shocks disrupt political patriarchy. By destabilizing the gendered division of labor and segregation of space, climate shocks enable women to assume new roles and, ultimately, to remake the public and private gendered balance of power.

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Why Are Climate Shocks "Gendered Shocks"?

Three features of typical climate shocks make them gendered. First, male out-migration from the devastation wrought by extreme weather alters intra-household power, increasing women's mobility and autonomy. Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer (2020, 292) find that majority-male migration is the dominant response to climate change across most of Africa, Central America, and South and East Asia. An increase in women-run households following recent disasters is well documented globally (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek 2018). In India, which accounts for roughly one-third of global climate-induced displacement, male labor migration rates exceed those of women in every state (Roscher 2021). Indian women "left behind" by recent male out-migration are more mobile and likely to vote (Kumar 2022; Roscher 2021).

I expect that male out-migration driven by climate shocks is distinct from the strategically determined, better-coordinated male out-migration that occurs when men leave in search of economic opportunities during lean agricultural seasons. Yet, to date, no work has systematically studied the impact of disaster-induced male out-migration on either women's political participation or women's willingness to compete as electoral candidates. This essay fills this gap.

Second, where climate shocks induce the out-migration of men who are the primary source of income for their households, women left behind frequently face "uncertain male remittances," which increase incentives to pursue sources of paid labor independent of male control (Enarson 1998, 166). Where women are successful at securing independent sources of income in men's absence, their economic autonomy should increase, as Kumar (2022) identifies in India following male short-term labor out-migration. Yet given how social networks can shift the local discourse and norms, as theorized by Prillaman (2021), women will likely be more successful at identifying, attaining, and controlling autonomous sources of income when they already are members of relatively dense, progressive female social networks.

Third, climate shocks heighten the gendered burdens of care by women. Here, the footprint of patriarchal norms that assign unpaid care roles to women is evident. Globally, women are the dominant specialists in providing care for others, making them most likely to become "first responders" after shocks (Enarson 1998). In the wake of crises, Kumar and Quisumbing (2014) find, women are more likely than men to lose assets, to trade formal for informal jobs, to reduce their food consumption, and to increase their workloads within families and in the informal sector.

Why Should Climate Shocks Increase Women's Representation?

Patriarchal gender relations are integral to the arc of climate shocks. What Luft (2016) calls "disaster patriarchy" helps explain the gendered scope of prior vulnerabilities, shock impact, and recovery patterns. The first implication of gendered climate shocks derives from their direct impact on the physical geography of families.

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An unanticipated departure of the family head reshapes decision-making within families. Roscher (2021) theorizes that male out-migration disrupts restrictions on female mobility, opening opportunities for women to become more politically engaged, in particular by voting. By signaling the acceptability of women's mobility at the community level, behavioral changes may transcend specific migrant households. I propose that even small adjustments enable new political coordination. By initiating political work, women gain information about the mechanics of political action and authority, enabling them to assume political roles typically reserved for men.

If so, climate shocks should increase the supply of women with the requisite information and gravitas to successfully run for office, leveraging their transitional status as proxy representatives of migrating household heads to make the case for their election on their own merit. In locales where strong patriarchal gender norms enforce the sexual division of labor, climate shocks can disrupt "family-centered" political coordination led by senior men (Prillaman 2021).

The second impact of climate shocks derives from their economic implications. This is an indirect effect of climate shocks' disruption of the gendered physical geography of families. Where such disruption occurs, I expect it will yield dividends for female autonomy, particularly economically. Interventions that encourage women to migrate alone for economic work diminish the extreme constraints on women's physical mobility in the context of patriarchal family organization (Jensen 2012). Male out-migration due to climate shocks can have the same effect: improving women's physical mobility and, with it, the autonomy to accrue economic resources that facilitate political engagement (Brulé 2020).

I expect that economic autonomy spurs political engagement as climate shocks also make the state, and its ability to rebuild social and physical infrastructure, salient and indispensable. In India, following the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Kruks-Wisner (2011) finds that devastation induced women to actively make claims upon the formal state: petitioning local officials to improve water, street lighting, or make other improvements for individuals or the community.

Third and finally, I theorize that the differential burdens of care women experience following climate shocks translate directly into greater levels of radical political engagement aimed at systemic transformation. This prediction is based on intersectional theory that identifies transformative political mobilization as the result of care work by African American women supporting jailed family members. Care work is a direct pathway to political mobilization. As Walker and García-Castañon (2017, 543–44) explain: "caregiving … becomes linked to political labor … proximal contact [to exploitative institutions] is a catalyst for political action." Where women differentially bear incalculably large burdens for the community's survival—simultaneously tending to personal, household, and community-level needs—this work can highlight the insufficiency of existing political and social systems to protect human life (Luft 2016, 13–14).

Climate shocks may therefore shift the institutional, organizational, and structural barriers that previously limited women's ability to catalyze radical

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change by contesting elections and running successful campaigns. Just as bottom-up channels can drive the adoption of quotas for women representatives in spaces formerly deemed inhospitable, they may also help explain the conditions under which women make the decision to run as individual candidates despite strong norms to the contrary. Chile's 2010 earthquake and tsunami catalyzed women's leadership in economic and social organization, leading to radical changes in local female political representation (Moreno and Shaw 2018). Similar findings identify female political empowerment as an impact of economic insecurity more broadly. For example, in Zambia, insecurity enabled women's economic integration and ultimately catalyzed greater levels of female political participation and representation (Evans 2016).

Does The Theory Travel?

Extrapolating from the aforementioned research, I expect that where climate shocks increase women's physical mobility and economic autonomy, women will become more able to articulate demands to the state, not just as individuals but as respected community representatives. This shift will make the state salient not only as an entity from which to claim resources, but also as a source of opportunity for women to effectively redirect public resources as *representatives* of the state. Does this occur in practice? I first highlight a case within South Asia, India, where I derive this theory, and then investigate an out-of-sample case, Chile.

In the wake of India's 2004 tsunami, the radical care needs inspired by climate shocks have reshaped women's political and economic agency. As one woman elected to lead her local council (Gram Panchayat) after the tsunami explained, "I survived the tsunami. Now I am here, and women come to me for help. Elderly women come, and pregnant women. They come to access their pensions, to access government schemes. Since the tsunami, women are learning their rights" (Kruks-Wisner 2011, 1151).

Next, consider Chile in 2010, just after a tsunami and earthquake. Outbreaks of infectious diseases and cold weather–borne illnesses made seeking out vital resources, such as clean drinking water, while attempting to bring new lives into the world impossible. A housewife and mother of two remembered, "There were two women who did not know they were pregnant until they lost their babies when they were carrying heavy buckets of water from the hill" (Moreno and Shaw 2018, 213). The simultaneous weight of grief and responsibility that women in such circumstances bear physically and psychologically is often invisible and unimaginable for men given the dual blinders of social conventions and the gendered division of labor. In response, women pushed what was typically domestic, private work into the public domain.

In El Morro, along Chile's northern coast, a 12-woman group called the "Palomitas Blancas" expanded dramatically from cooking food for small-scale fundraising before the earthquake to dominating the public space in acquiring and directing community resources to feed 170 families after the earthquake (Moreno and Shaw 2018). One Palomitas Blancas member went further to

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manage the crises caused by the earthquake and tsunami, first informally leading the community kitchen and managing humanitarian aid and later winning an election against the town's male leader. She explained her move as an extension of her care work, compelled by necessity: "I wanted to help because I always liked helping people, especially the elderly. I also knew that if I had not done something, there would have been chaos" (Moreno and Shaw 2018, 214). Seven years after the disaster, women continue to alter the social, economic, and political fabric of life from their positions of political authority. The woman who stepped up to head the local Neighborhood Council remained in power. Her leadership, along with significant organization by women's groups—in particular, El Morro's first fisherwomen collective—likely convinced the government to exclusively grant women the legal title of new permanent houses built in the wake of the tsunami and earthquake's destruction (Moreno and Shaw 2018, 216).

Conclusion: Predicting Political Change

Where conditions are right, climate shocks can enable an exceptional rerouting of patriarchy, whereby women work to reclaim public political space, with the potential to alter not only the gendered division of labor but also the gendered balance of power in public and private. Climate shocks are likely to improve female autonomy in regions where two conditions hold: they initiate male out-migration and classic patriarchy prevails—that is, families are organized around male patriarchs with gender-based seclusion. These include rural areas of South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Here, male out-migration catalyzed by other shocks such as war or conflict may have similar impacts.

What should we expect in regions where climate shocks do not induce male out-migration? Where norms support strict, gender-based seclusion, climate-shock-induced male labor *in-migration* likely limits female physical and economic autonomy, reducing female candidates for political representation. These patterns are probable in urban centers of South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, as well as socially conservative parts of East Asia and the United States. In these contexts, climate shocks may also induce *female out-migration* that shifts the gendered balance of power by increasing female autonomy, destabilizing conservative gender norms, and expanding long-term opportunities for women's political representation.

Where social norms support more gender-neural or integrated economic organization, climate shocks are unlikely to dramatically disrupt social norms. If male out-migration ensues, climate shocks may have positive effects at the margins, opening new space for female organization in the near future. If female out-migration ensues, similar change may occur with a longer arc. Such changes are plausible in Western Europe and socially progressive parts of North America, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. If male *in-migration* follows climate shocks, slight negative effects may occur at the margins as women's space for economic and political organization shrinks. This is possible in Eastern Europe and North and South America, where new jobs are emerging in once-blighted regional economies.

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This theory suggests several promising avenues of future research. First, changes in family structures have direct implications for political systems. For example, residence with extended families may either provide a brake or engine for gender equity-promoting economic and political change. State policy matters, too, with state provision of public goods such as subsidized child care and secure civil service jobs with paid parental leave potentially approximating the benefits of extended families with fewer social constraints. Second, in the future climate shocks will increase, changing families and also where and how human collectives can thrive. It is time to investigate catalysts for constructive political change that builds collective resilience. Gender equality is a crucial building block for this transformation.

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