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Changing Climates, Changing Health

Climate change has become relevant today, primarily as a topic of debate. Many believe that the climate and the environment are worsening, primarily due to human activity, and this negatively impacts society. However, others perceive that what many scientists and researchers deem “climate change” is not a pressing concern. The issue has been politicized to such great extents that the real nuances of the topic, such as how climate change may affect different groups of people in different ways, are overlooked. Climate change needs to be studied more thoroughly, and new perspectives on how to combat it need to be considered, so that those who may be affected by it the most, or experience unique health disparities, will have the access to the help they need so that they can live healthy lives. Although climate change affects different individuals and their health in disparate ways, specific strategies can be used, taking an intersectional approach into account, in order to improve the overall health of nations. When examining the effect of climate change on a body, importance must be given to all the situations and contexts one may grow up with, as health is influenced by combinations of external factors as well, and not just biological processes.

In many studies, climate change has been linked to various health issues. Weather and other climate-related natural phenomena, such as droughts, floods, and landslides, can affect health and state of living (Campbell-Lendrum, 2005). However, climate change is often considered by comparing its influence on geographical locations, which usually translates to how it impacts different nations and their populations. More modern research does go deeper into

how climate change affects gender in different ways. Many of these studies conclude that women are “more vulnerable” than men to climate change, giving justifications that they are “the majority of the world’s poor” and “more dependent...on natural resources” (Women, 2009). However, these studies usually only consider gender as one of two categories, either male or female, without mentioning or studying non-normative genders. Current research has begun to take more categories into consideration, such as race and class, especially through the perspectives of other categories such as gender (Ballew, 2017). Such research is more relevant and meaningful.

Some argue that one’s vulnerability to climate change is innate, or only due to some specific characteristic traits, such as race, or gender. In recent years, however, an opposing viewpoint is becoming more prevalent: the theory of intersectionality. The practice of viewing an issue or condition by considering a combination of categories is the basis of this theory. When trying to analyze and understand health disparities, an intersectional approach must be taken, as categories such as race, gender, and class do not affect health or bodies individually. These categories are not disparate; instead, they are additive, and they all must be examined to understand how these identifiers create a social context that is particular to that individual or situation. Considering the overall influences of these categories allows researchers to understand “how sex and gender intersect with other dimensions of inequality, particularly historic and geographic contexts, to create unique experiences of health” (Hankivsky, 2012, p. 1713). This leads into the idea that bodies are both historical and biological, as they are equally shaped by society, history, and culture. Therefore, a body impacted by climate change is not weakened specifically because of a biological difference; one might have been lacking access to proper healthcare or resources for other, possibly social reasons, and it would be wrong to assume that

one's health was directly only related to biological processes, without taking into consideration other factors and stressors.

This also emphasizes why health does not simply mean one's physical health; health is not just the absence of disease in the body, and not just an individual's responsibility—it is influenced by one's mental, social, and emotional states. Failing to recognize these other stimuli would mean taking a reductionist approach to the topic of health. Reductionism is the practice of evaluating an issue by considering its simpler components; however, in doing so, one can oversimplify a complex situation and misunderstand an issue or misidentify its cause (Lock, 1998, p. 48). In reality, health is not self-evident; it must be viewed through political, social, and historical contexts, and be recognized as the responsibility of communities as a whole (Lock, 1998, p. 48). Similarly, to understand the effects of climate change, location cannot be the only factor that affects how different people are affected by climate change, so it is wrong to base assumptions or even treatments solely on that.

Many studies over the years have linked high risk for climate change with low or lower-middle income nations (Eckstein, 2017). Countries that have experienced disasters recurrently, such as Pakistan and the Philippines, are also more likely to be negatively impacted by climate change (Eckstein, 2017). This is because such nations have limited access to the resources they would need to deal with climate change disasters, which can lead the overall health of the nation to decline.

When specifically focusing on the United States, studies have also shown that race is the “number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities” in the country, and that people of color and those with lower socioeconomic status are also more vulnerable to climate change. This makes sense, as history and society combine to create the unique situation many underprivileged communities find themselves in. Many of these people have always been

discriminated against or have had limited opportunities and resources throughout their lives, making them less prepared to combat the effects of climate change or to find access to resources that will allow them to do so.

When considering gender, women are viewed to be more vulnerable than men. This is not always justified with data, but usually backed up by theoretical analysis: that it is “obvious,” due to the “social, political and economic marginalization experienced by women in various contexts” (Asher, 2016). Migration is usually viewed as a “male-dominated strategy” to climate change, while women are less likely and less able to leave an area because of climate change (Asher, 2016). Women are often limited in the opportunities or strategies they may adopt, especially when they are heads of household (Asher, 2016). Because of “socially driven gender inequity,” women are often forced to participate in “low-benefit, low-risk activities” to sustain their families, while male-dominated activities such as employment are out of their reach (Asher, 2016). However, there is little, if any research, taking into consideration non-normative genders, and people who identify with such often deal with greater discrimination and lack of opportunities than those who identify with normative genders; following this trend, it seems that they would be even more vulnerable to climate change, although there is no evidence yet to support that.

Ironically, research also shows that those groups who are more vulnerable to climate change also happen to be more concerned about it. For example, 71% of Hispanic Americans, and 57% of African Americans, are “very or somewhat concerned” about climate change and its effects, which is greater than the 43% of white Americans who feel this way (Ballew, 2017). In addition, climate change is viewed as more important in comparison to other issues related to the environment, such as pollution, for many minority populations in the United States, more so than for white Americans (Ballew, 2017). In fact, when considering all the racial groups in the United

States, white males are “significantly more likely...to deny the existence of climate change” (Ballew, 2017). In the United States, as well as other wealthier countries, women are more likely than men to consider climate change as a “very serious problem,” believing that it harmfully affects themselves and their surroundings, and that in order to mitigate climate change’s impact, “people will need to make major changes in their lifestyles” (Ballew, 2017). Despite holding these beliefs, women also “underestimated” their own understanding of the concept of climate change, believing that they were “significantly less knowledgeable than men” (Ballew, 2017). Overall, the trend is that racial, ethnic, and gender minorities are more concerned about climate change and what actions must be taken in order to combat it, compared to the average white male American.

Some argue that the reasons for health disparities in the context of climate change are still simply biological. Minority communities, who do not always have access to the same education, food, and healthcare that more privileged communities have, are often the ones who are more vulnerable to climate change. These factors, which are not only environmental but also social, are the cause of their health issues, not race. History does play a large role in health disparities; for example, in the past, African American people faced tremendous discrimination and were unable to have the same opportunities as others, such as their inability to get home loans or live in suburbs. Because of such segregation, racial minorities in the United States are “substantially more likely to live near hazardous industrial sites and high-pollution-emitting power plants” compared to white communities (Ballew, 2017). In fact, when comparing people of color and white people with the same socioeconomic status in the United States, people of color “experience up to 20 times the level of smog exposure” (Ballew, 2017). But these health disparities allow them to be more aware of their environment, and understanding of the impacts that climate change could have on themselves and their surroundings. In fact, a theory suggests

that those who have “exposure to environmental hazards and harm” are impelled to have more concern about the environment and climate change, and support conservation efforts and other protective actions (Ballew, 2017).

Despite the concern and awareness of numerous citizens, the United States still is not making the progress it could be achieving when it comes to climate change. In fact, the country could possibly leave the Paris Agreement in November 2020, which shows that in some regards, backwards steps are being taken. Seeing that minority populations and females are more likely to believe in climate change and its effects, while white males are less convinced, it seems that the United States’ current government and presidential cabinet tend to fall into the latter category, which could explain why there has not been significant policy additions or changes made to combat climate change. However, for those citizens who do believe in climate change, it is wrong to neglect their opinions—the current administration, at least, is not reflecting the opinions of many of its constituents.

In order to mitigate the issue, state and local governments should play a larger role in preparing for environmental disasters connected to climate change. Taking into consideration places which are racially segregated or have high poverty levels, cities should “focus on economic equity as well as environmental preparedness” (Delgadillo, 2017). Solutions could involve increasing income for those who live in such “low-income areas” (Delgadillo, 2017). People with low incomes are unable to prepare the resources necessary in order to sufficiently protect themselves or their belongings when there is a disaster; they also lack the funds necessary to rebuild their lives after such disasters (Delgadillo, 2017). Such people simply need more money to be prepared and deal with climate change. Another issue is related to gentrification; if a city tries to become more environmentally friendly, it becomes “more desirable” for those with higher incomes, which may cause displacement of the initial lower income residents (Delgadillo,

2017). In order to deal with this issue, housing requirements and expectations should be set up, giving those who originally lived there the ability to live in the healthy environment they deserve to have (Delgadillo, 2017). Possibly the most effective way to allow those minority or low-income communities to access their current situations and come up with solutions is to simply focus on “outreach and communication,” so that these vulnerable groups feel like they and their issues have been given importance and time, and they will be the best people to identify their current risks and suggest ways to improve their health and lives (Delgadillo, 2017). By implementing these strategies, those who have previously been susceptible to climate change’s effects will be able to better deal with any future disasters that may occur.

Climate change is becoming a large and pressing concern today, and its effects on health are often due to one’s overall situation in life—with factors such as gender, race, and class having different effects on a specific body, making it difficult to identify a solution that will work for every individual. Despite those limitations, there are ways to focus on the communities that are impacted the most and help them out specifically, so that health of both communities and entire nations will improve.

However, more research does need to be conducted in order to come to a more developed conclusion. Although studies have begun to see the value in taking an intersectional approach to issues, few have applied that to the topic of climate change, making it nearly impossible to identify specific examples of health disparities that are linked to climate change and certain factors such as society or history. Non-normative genders, as well as various sexualities, should be considered when comparing identifiers, as a dichotomous view of gender has never sufficiently categorized or understood the diverse people in the world, and the resulting research would be unique and definitely interesting to consider. More detailed and thorough studies would give more evidence why climate change is a real issue, as well as highlight the different impacts

it has on various groups of people, allowing governments and organizations to focus their efforts on those who need help the most.

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