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At the Frontline of Climate Activism: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Gendered Dynamics Within Contemporary Climate Activist Movements in Ireland

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Abstract: Utilising a gender lens, this research explores the dynamics of contemporary climate activism in Ireland. A gendered analysis of climate activism can aid the development of novel understandings of how gender identity and relations inform approaches to tackling the climate crisis. Climate related disasters are increasing in severity and frequency at an alarming rate, resulting in the emergence of new climate movements on a global scale. Broadly, contemporary climate movements aim to hold governments and corporations accountable for climate catastrophe and have played a substantial role in the public push for governments globally to declare a climate emergency.

Ethnographic observations followed by semi-structured interviews with members of contemporary climate movements are used to gain insight into how gender is embedded in climate movement identity, participation, and tactics. An ethnographic research approach aligns with previous research studies that commonly deploy ethnographic methods for the in-depth exploration of how gender informs environmental movement activism (Krauss, 1993; Kurtz, 2007; Bell and Braun, 2010; Willow and Keefer, 2015). This research incorporates visual ethnography through photo documentation of the props and banners used during demonstrations. Props and banners can be used by activists as a tool to frame the movements' identity, motivations and demands and therefore visual documentation and analysis enriches data collection and findings. The theoretical underpinning of this research is informed by feminist interpretations of social movement research, providing a systematic analysis of how social movements are gendered (Kuumba, 2001; Einwohner et al.,2000). This theoretical synthesis combines new social movement theory with ecofeminist theory to develop a distinct gendered analysis of contemporary climate activism.

Keywords: Contemporary Climate Activism, Ecofeminism, Ethnographic Observations, Gender, New Social Movement Theory, Visual Ethnography

1. Introduction

The increasing severity of climate change has mobilised individuals across the world, forming new climate movements that demand action be taken by governments to address the climate crisis. There has been a gradual increase of climate activism since the early 2000's, with significant mobilisation present from 2018 onward, with the formation of the climate movements, Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) (Hayes and O'Neill, 2021). FFF was sparked by the young female activist, Greta Thunberg, who in 2018 solo protested outside the Swedish Parliament, choosing not to attend school to protest. The attention Thunberg received for her activism inspired an international youth-led climate movement of school strikes that centres on the issue of intergenerational climate justice. At the time that youth were organising and mobilising the FFF movement, another climate movement was developed in the United Kingdom, known as Extinction Rebellion (XR). The now transnational movement of XR utilises tactics that are non-violent through mostly direct action and civil disobedience, attempting to elicit social transformation.

Research that explores participation and dynamics of contemporary climate movements such as XR and FFF identifies a trend associated with gender distribution, establishing that on average there is a higher proportion of women compared to men and other genders present at climate protests (Wahlstrom et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2020; Cologna et al., 2021; Noth and Tonzer, 2022). Survey data across European countries have found the representation of Greta Thunberg as a 'role model' and 'political icon' has a mobilising impact predominantly on young people (under 20) and females, reflecting a trend of the FFF movement being led by female youth (Wahlstrom and Uba, 2023). XR displayed similar trends of gender distribution among climate protesters as outlined in a working paper detailing the profile of participants at XR protests in London during 2019 (Saunders, 2020). Although FFF and XR have been established in Ireland since 2018, there remains a gap in knowledge relating to how gender has impacted the dynamics of these climate movements in the Irish context.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 New Social Movement Theory and Gender

New social movement (NSM) theory emerged in response to new social movement development from the 1960s onward in predominantly Western societies. This shift to NSM theory is identified as the cultural turn in social movement studies (Tarrow, 2022). Social movements draw on existing cultural frameworks which inform the identification, interpretation, and expression of 'social and political grievances' (Taylor, 2000, p.511). This means that movements 'frame specific grievances with collective action frames which dignify claims, connect them to others, and help produce a collective identity' (Tarrow, 2022, p.124). The ways that movements frame their actions and identities has been influenced by cultural understandings of gender. Rachel L. Einwohner et al. (2000) claim that 'gender can be used by social movement participants who wish to construct their image in a certain light, frame an issue in a particular way, or claim legitimacy as actors in a given arena' (p.680). For instance, commonly deployed in women's activism is the 'maternal frame' (Kuumba, 2001), known in relation to environmental activism as 'motherhood environmentalism'. Ecofeminist scholar Catriona Sandilands (1999) claims that the narrative of 'motherhood environmentalism' is imposing a simplistic and narrow view of women's motivations as climate activists, essentializing their relationship to nature, care work, and thus to climate activism. Ecofeminist theory has critically analysed how patriarchal power justifies the mutual devaluation of both nature and women through the essentialist association of women to the non-human world (Warren,1994).

Research has found that women's engagement in environmental activism is more likely to be framed around cultural expectations of motherhood and care, compared to male environmental activists commonly framing their activism as motivated by scientific understandings of climate change (Bell and Braun, 2010; Kizewski, 2015, Willow and Keefer, 2015). Moreover, gender has been found to influence distribution of roles and responsibilities in climate movements, reflective of a wider gender division of labour. Older female XR activists in Australia describe the disproportionate expectation to carry out emotional support for other climate activists, outlining the 'gendered politics of care' and emotional labour within climate movements (Gardner et al., 2023). Additionally, an intersectional analysis of two anti-fracking organisations in the US identified that work was distributed differently among organisation members based on gender, in that women were more likely to perform outreach and administrative work, in other words, 'the brunt of the work' while men 'adopted roles in the organization that mirrored that of their professional lives' (Kizewski, 2015, p.86). Although such examples display conformity to traditional constructions of gender, it is important to acknowledge that 'gender expressions and identities within the context of environmental activism are complex and overlapping' (Willow and Keefer, 2015, p.93) and can both conform to and challenge conventional gender roles. For instance, a young woman described her motivations to participate at a climate protest in 2019 as 'taking an active stance against patriarchy' (Martiskanian et al, 2019: 15).

3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Research Design

This research is carried out using the qualitative research methods of ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews. Ethnography is concerned with the process of interactions within a chosen setting. Coffey (2018) posits that ethnography is an interactional process 'between the ethnographer, the field of study and social actors with/in the field' (Coffey, 2018, p.7), meaning researchers often participate, to varying extents, within the field of study. This research entails the participation of the researcher as a climate activist at XR and FFF protests, events, and meetings, embedding the researcher in lived experiences of climate movement activists in Ireland. Ethnographic observations are commonly accompanied by photography and video/audio recording (Madden, 2017; Coffey, 2018) which this research incorporates using visual ethnography of the props and banners used at climate protests. Examples of props and banners used at climate protests include:



Figure 1: 'Non-Violent' (Extinction Rebellion)



Figure 2: 'Women for Climate Action' (Extinction Rebellion)



Figure 3: Image of Greta Thunberg with the caption 'Hope is taking action' (Fridays For Future)

Observations not only provide an opportunity to understand the social world of contemporary climate activism in Ireland but also inform the curation of interview topics and techniques. In-depth semi structured interviews with an estimated 8 FFF activists and 8 XR activists are used to gain further insight into how gender informs the identities of those who participate in climate activism, the motivations of climate activists, the organisational and protest tactics of the climate movements, and the distribution of roles and responsibilities of climate activists.

3.2 Feminist Ethnography

This research deploys a feminist ethnographic approach to study contemporary climate movements, meaning it utilises a gendered perspective 'to highlight the ways in which gender ideologies and identities are embedded in the framing and identity construction processes of social movements' (Kuumba, 2001, p.18). Although 'there is no single "feminist way" to do research' (Reinharz, 1992, p.243), Davis and Craven (2022) have developed a working definition of feminist ethnography which includes but is not limited to paying attention to and challenging marginality , injustices and power differentials; drawing inspiration from feminist scholarship; acknowledging and reflecting upon power relations; and an aim to produce scholarship that may contribute to movement building (p.13).

4. Conclusion

My empirical research will inform and advance understandings of the under researched relationship between gender and contemporary climate activist movements. Investigating how gender informs our responses and approaches to climate action can help 'challenge the patriarchal systems that perpetuate climate change to leave behind a more gender-just and ecologically sustainable society for future generations' (Iglesias, 2022).

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