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## Social (in) justice, climate change and climate policy in Western Australia

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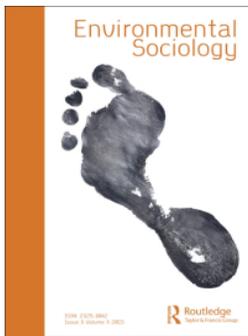
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## Social (In)justice, climate change and climate policy in Western Australia

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### ABSTRACT

Climate change is a social justice issue, and people who experience disadvantage and marginalisation are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In 2019–2020, the government of the state of Western Australia (WA) held the world's first inquiry into climate change and health. The Inquiry report, submissions, and hearing transcripts make an important contribution to a small but growing body of evidence that climate change exacerbates and reinforces existing social inequalities in WA in areas such as health, economics, gender relations, and access and inclusion. However, in late-2020, the WA government released its 38-page Climate Policy, with very limited reference to social justice and only one use of the word 'people'. Our critical intersectional feminist analysis finds a prevailing dissonance between climate evidence and climate policy in WA. Climate governance in WA is ill prepared, if not unwilling, to support people who experience disadvantage and are on the frontlines of the climate crisis. There is an urgent need for policies and actions to address multiple dimensions of inequality under climate change, across the fields of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and disaster response.

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Climate change; climate justice; Western Australia; climate policy; social justice

### Introduction

Comprising one-third of the Australian landmass, Western Australia (WA) is the second-largest sub-national jurisdiction in the world and is extremely susceptible to the impacts of climate change (Climate Council of Australia [CCA] 2019; Department of Water and Environmental Regulation [DWER] 2019). WA is already experiencing increased intensity and frequency of slow-onset and rapid climate events, including increasing temperatures, reduced rainfall, drought, and catastrophic events such as floods, bushfires, and storms in an unprecedented scale impacting human well-being and livelihoods, ecosystems and other species (Bureau of Meteorology [BoM] and CSIRO 2020; DWER 2019; Weeramanthri et al. 2020). These climate risks are situated alongside an economy that is heavily reliant on emissions-intensive extractive industries and exporting minerals and petroleum (DWER 2019, 1). WA disproportionately contributes to catastrophic warming, producing 17% of Australia's total annual greenhouse gas emissions which are rising annually (Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources [DISER] 2018), and 4.5 times its share of the global emissions budget (CCA 2019). WA is a key international producer of liquefied natural gas, and as Australia proceeds with its 'gas-led recovery' to the COVID-19 pandemic, the approved Burrup Hub gas extraction project in north-west WA will emit over six billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions over its 50-year lifetime, making it Australia's most polluting project (Hare, Fuentes, and Chapman 2020).

While WA's climate risks and emissions profile are well-documented, there is limited public discourse about climate change and social (in)justice in WA. In 2019–2020, the WA Government held a Climate Health WA Inquiry (CHWAI), a world-first government-led public inquiry into health in the context of climate change. The Inquiry report identified that 'though the public are increasingly aware of climate change and its environmental risks, the specific pathways and links between climate change and human health risks and impacts are less well understood' (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, x). The Inquiry report, submissions and hearing transcripts make an important contribution to a small but growing body of evidence regarding the intersection of climate change and social (in)justice in WA and Australia more broadly. However, the translation of evidence into policy continues to be a challenge for the WA Government, as demonstrated in the technologically-focused WA Climate Policy that was released in late-2020 (DWER 2020a).

This article examines climate change and social (in)justice in WA. It begins with a critical feminist analysis of climate change, and uses this lens to explore research on the social justice impacts of climate change in WA, across several themes: First Nations peoples; health and wellbeing; economic justice; gender and sexuality; and access and inclusion. We then analyse the WA Climate Policy in the context of this literature, and identify the need for policies and actions to address multiple dimensions of inequality across climate change mitigation, adaptation, and disaster response.

## Critical feminism and climate change

African American feminist bell hooks described the structural roots of injustice and violence as the ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ (hooks 2009, 8). Similarly, climate justice researchers and activists contend that climate change, as the human-induced warming of Earth and resultant slow-onset and extreme weather events, is caused by, and reproduces, violent systems of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism (Gaard 2015; Malin and Ryder 2018; Tuana 2019; Wright and Nyberg 2015). Critical feminism helps us identify examples of the oppressive, structural roots of climate change. Through colonialism, First Nations homelands are used to extract, marketize and burn fossil fuels (Birch 2016) and for climate ‘solutions’ such as large-scale, privatised renewable energy (see, for example, Normann 2021). Furthermore, water, land, food and communities are increasingly corporatized for the profit of a very small minority, with company operations underpinned by ‘sustainability plans’ and ‘carbon programs’ (Wright and Nyberg 2015). Entrenched inequalities of power and wealth exclude the voices and rights of First Nations peoples, women and non-binary folks, people of colour, low-income people and other marginalised groups from climate decision-making and policy (Bell 2016; Choy et al. 2013; Gaard 2015; Petheram et al. 2010; Porter et al. 2020; Walker and Mason 2015), and international climate leadership is highly dominated by white, middle-aged, heterosexual, high-income earning men from developed countries (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; MacGregor 2014). hooks’ structural frame reminds us of the relationship between violence against the Earth and violence against humanity (hooks 2009).

An *intersectional* critical feminist lens is particularly crucial to understanding multidimensional experiences of inequality and climate change. This is because climate events expose, highlight, and exacerbate social injustices and inequalities between and within countries, and the impacts are most felt by people who are already marginalised and vulnerable (Bell 2016). An intersectional lens recognises that specific groups (such as ‘Indigenous’ and ‘women’) are not homogenous, requiring situated analyses of injustice (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon 2014; Tuana 2019). Importantly, Kaijser and Kronsell (2014, 422) stress that intersectional analysis should extend from identifying power patterns to ‘problematizing the underlying social categorisations and see how these are reinforced or challenged in light of climate change’.

In this article, critical intersectional feminism assists us to examine the experiences and underlying structures of social injustice under climate change in WA, across the themes of First Nations peoples; health and wellbeing; economic justice; gender and sexuality; and access and inclusion.

## Social justice impacts of climate change in WA

### First Nations peoples

First Nations peoples across their diversities of age, gender and (dis)ability are particularly vulnerable to climate change in WA. In a public hearing to the CHWAI, the Aboriginal Health Council of WA (AHCWA) explained the relationship between Aboriginal cultural identity and connection to land and Country<sup>1</sup>:

For our people, it’s, “I’m country and country is me. I am culture and culture is me. I am the bush, the bush is me. I am the river, the river is me. My family is me and we are one. We are community”. (Ronda Clarke, cited in AHCWA 2019a, 2)

Clarke explained that ‘the impacts of climate change resembles [sic] the experiences of colonisation’ (AHCWA 2019a, 2), and that climate change is

a disease that ... affects and impacts on every living thing, from the individual, their family, the infant within the womb, the wildlife, their offspring, their eggs, the fish in the ocean or the waterways, the plants, the trees, the bush, the bush tucker, our traditional medicines and the landscape on which one lives, works and plays. (AHCWA 2019a, 2)

CHWAI submissions, hearings and workshop data reveal a range of climate change-induced social injustices for Aboriginal peoples, including elevating existing health inequalities and increased burden of illness and disease (such as respiratory and mosquito-borne diseases); water and food insecurity (including due to loss of native plant species and wildlife habitat); and negative impacts on mental health (including grief, loss, stress and anxiety) and social and emotional wellbeing, which are reliant on ‘connection to country, continuity with community, physical, emotional and cultural wellbeing’ (AHCWA 2019b, 5). AHCWA also stated,

climate change has the potential to destroy cultural practices, traditional knowledge, community lands and family homes, and can force Aboriginal communities to relocate to new, unfamiliar country (AHCWA 2019b, 4).

The CHWAI contributes to a very small collection of literature about social justice and climate change for First Nations peoples in WA. In a climate change adaptation study, Leonard et al. (2013) found that Aboriginal people in WA’s Kimberley region are likely to be disproportionately affected by climate change events, exacerbating existing social and economic disadvantages. In particular,

For communities that retain subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing and traditional food harvesting, their livelihoods and the cultural and social aspects of their way of life are vulnerable to climate-driven environmental change (Leonard et al. 2013, 3).

Other Australian literature reiterates that First Nations peoples have unique experiences of climate change due to connections with Country (Arabena and Kingsley 2015; Green and Minchin 2014; Nursey-Bray and Palmer 2018; Zander, Petheram, and Garnett 2013). Climate events may damage or destroy cultural heritage sites and wild food networks (Choy et al. 2013), and First Nations peoples may be displaced from Country and relocated to increasingly stressed urban settings (Arabena and Kingsley 2015; Hunter 2009; Zander, Petheram, and Garnett 2013). First Nations peoples' vulnerability to climate change in WA is exacerbated by existing inequalities such as lower life expectancy and higher rates of disability, chronic disease, suicide, unemployment, poverty, family and community violence, and overcrowded and poor housing, compared with non-indigenous Australians (Choy et al. 2013; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC] 2020; Green and Minchin 2014; Hunter 2009; Petheram et al. 2010).

Furthermore, First Nations weather knowledges, cultures, peoples and rights have generally been excluded from Australian climate change decision-making and policies that privilege white, male perspectives (Choy et al. 2013; Leonard et al. 2013; Nursey-Bray and Palmer 2018; Petheram et al. 2010). AHCWA (2019b) stresses that 'Aboriginal people must be empowered to share their traditional knowledge, maintain sovereignty over their land, and be pivotal in any decision making' (11). Indeed, Robertson and Barrow (2020, 135) assert that over a 48,000-year period on *boodja* (Country), Nyoongar Aboriginal people in South Western WA developed a 'value-based, highly cooperative society' that enabled them to respond to significant periods of climate change (including a -10,000 year drought) in line with available resources. They argue that Nyoongar values will be crucial to their survival of climate change. For climate policy to be responsive to First Nations peoples, there must be acknowledgement of Indigenous models of governance, and unbiased dispersal of power in policy, partnerships, rights and resources for cultural legitimacy and for deeper agency (Nursey-Bray and Palmer 2018).

### Health and wellbeing

The CHWAI (Weeramanthri et al. 2020) found that climate change is a significant health risk in WA, and risks can include injury or death resulting from an extreme weather event; heat-related illness (see also Xiao et al. 2017); asthma or respiratory distress triggered by bushfire smoke; air pollution causing and exacerbating lung disease, cardiovascular disease (including heart disease and stroke), cancer, pregnancy complications and the incidence of low birthweight babies; mosquito-borne disease; other infectious diseases such as salmonella and gastroenteritis; decreased quality of

food and water (see also Pollard et al. 2014); food and water insecurity; population displacement; and mental health impacts. The Inquiry recognised that vulnerable peoples were most at risk of these health impacts, including children and youth (see also Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2019); people with pre-existing medical condition including disability; women; older people; people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds (including risks of heat stress when outdoors due to heavy clothing such as burqas); low-income earners; people experiencing homelessness; Aboriginal peoples; outdoor workers and farming communities; people living in rural and remote regions; people living in urban areas; and the prison population; and emerging vulnerable groups of volunteers and first responders (Weeramanthri et al. 2020).

Climate events can cause child health risks such as overheating, dehydration, vector-borne diseases, and mental health concerns (Hughes, Hanna, and Fenwick 2016; Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Sevoyan et al. 2013). These are intensified with new migrant status, low-income and disability (Boon et al. 2012; Sevoyan et al. 2013). Older Australians have 'increased rates of injury during extreme weather events ... and are more susceptible to infections and chronic disease in the aftermath' (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, 53). They are vulnerable to heat waves due to declining physical and cognitive health, tendency to overdress, lack of thirst, limited transport and fear of high power bills (Hansen et al. 2013; Horton, Hanna, and Kelly 2010; Sevoyan et al. 2013); especially First Nations elderly people with chronic illnesses such as kidney disease (Sevoyan et al. 2013). People with disability may experience difficulties regulating their body temperature, and other risks include interrupted energy supply for essential equipment (Weeramanthri et al. 2020).

Identified mental health impacts of climate change in WA include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety due to the trauma of extreme weather events, and a sense of loss causing eco-anxiety, ecological grief and solastalgia (distress from environmental change) (Weeramanthri et al. 2020). Research in WA's Wheatbelt region suggests the impacts of climate change on mental health are intensifying (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018; Ellis and Albrecht 2017). Ellis and Albrecht (2017) found that people form strong personal relationships with their local settings, creating 'emotional and psychological needs related to identity, belonging, security, self-esteem, self-efficacy and solace' (161). A further study (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018) concluded that the drying Wheatbelt climate can provoke ecological grief among farmers. Ecological grief can emerge through loss of livelihoods, income, and ecosystems due to climate change (Galway et al. 2019). According to Cunsolo and Ellis, these situations can lead to prolonged mental health risks, anxiety, grief

(solastalgia), loss of personal or cultural identity, and increased consumption of alcohol and domestic violence. Similarly, a study in rural South West WA found that risk of depression was greater in areas with higher proportions of Indigenous peoples and dryland salinity (Speldewinde et al. 2009).

The WA experiences are reinforced by other Australian research, including evidence of older Torres Strait Islander women experiencing solastalgia due to climate-induced changes to identity and place (McNamara and Westoby 2011), and evidence of financial stress for rural communities during the Millennium Drought (1996–2010) causing increased substance use, depression, anxiety and suicide for male farmers (Alston 2011; Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Whittenbury 2013), and stress, anxiety, depression, post-natal depression and grief for female farmers (Alston 2011). It is argued that declining social services in depopulating rural towns exacerbates mental health concerns (Alston 2011). Importantly, ecological grief is frequently left unconsidered in climate change narratives and in neoliberal agricultural policies (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018)

### *Economic justice*

Economic exclusion is a key determinant of vulnerability to climate change, as low-income Australians have fewer resources to prepare, respond, cope and recover from climate events (Bell and Blashki 2014; Hansen et al. 2013; Sevoyan et al. 2013; WACOSS 2019a). During the CHWAI, WA Council of Social Services (WACOSS) (2019b, 2) explained that for people in poverty, ‘access to resources, disposable income, choices of power and social connections are all really limited’. People on low incomes are more likely to live in climate event-risk areas in low-quality, energy inefficient housing without insulation or air-conditioning, with greater susceptibility to rising costs for electricity, water, food and transportation (CHWAI 2020; Cornwell et al. 2016). Furthermore, people living in disadvantaged suburban areas are also less likely to perceive the benefits of green infrastructure as they expect it will further stretch their financial resources; as a result, these communities may resist adaptive climate policies unless parallel policies respond to localised economic and thermal inequalities (Ambrey et al. 2017). Lack of car ownership may also impede effective adaptation, especially in rural areas without public transport (Sevoyan et al. 2013).

A CHWAI workshop for people of CaLD backgrounds also identified economic difficulties when supporting families overseas who are affected by climate events, and challenges adapting to heat – especially when living in homes without air-conditioning (CHWAI 2020). Other Australian research suggests that extreme events exacerbate women’s unpaid care

burden, with increased risk of feminised poverty (Alston 2011; Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Whittenbury 2013). Furthermore, elderly people, First Nations peoples and people with disability have decreased financial capacity to respond to stressors such as extreme heat, intensifying health risks (Choy et al. 2013; Loughnan and Carroll 2015; Petheram et al. 2010; Sevoyan et al. 2013; Walker 2015). People employed in fossil fuel industries may also experience economic exclusion if the transition to a carbon-free economy is poorly managed (Stanford 2020). Furthermore, Shaw, Stocker, and Noble (2015) suggest that communities who depend on ecosystems for their livelihoods face more than just economic risks. They found that climate change contributed to the collapse of WA’s Abrolhos rock lobster fishing community after reduced fishing yields resulted in financial stress and unemployment, and the increase of domestic violence, mental health incidents, and alcohol and other drug use.

### *Gender and sexuality*

In WA, there is limited research regarding the gendered impacts of climate change. Shaw, Stocker, and Noble (2015) found that the economic stressors brought on by climate change in WA’s traditionally male-oriented Abrolhos fishing community contributed to women’s loss of political power, and as male fishers internally migrated for additional work many women’s domestic workload increased to that of single parents. The CHWAI (Weeramamthri et al. 2020) acknowledged international evidence that climate change exacerbates gendered inequalities, noting issues such as increased caring responsibilities for women during and after extreme weather events, increased risk of family and domestic violence, and reduced access to contraceptives and maternal health services. The report identified specific climate health issues for women, including difficulties regulating body temperature when pregnant (which may cause complications), breastfeeding challenges and dehydration in hot weather.

Across Australia, evidence suggests that climate change entrenches gender inequality and traditional gender roles. Research indicates increased rates of violence against women during and after climate events (Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Sevoyan et al. 2013; Whittenbury 2013), with heightened excuse making and legitimization of male perpetrators, entrenching male privilege (Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015). Furthermore, single parent households, generally headed by women, experience increased economic tensions under climate change (Sevoyan et al. 2013). Climate change also has gender-differentiated health impacts. For example, during climate events farming men have a greater risk of

physical injuries (Whittenbury 2013), and pregnant women experience heightened risks from increased stress, lack of access to nutritious food, and higher likelihood of violence (Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015). Research in drought-affected communities found a tendency for women to ignore their own health needs to prioritise the health of male partners (Alston 2011; Whittenbury 2013). Australian men have a greater likelihood of dying during bushfires, while women are more likely to die during heat waves (Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013).

Research also indicates that LGBTQIA+ Australians experience 'double marginalization' under climate change (Gorman-Murray et al. 2017, 44), due to state-sanctioned, institutional and interpersonal discrimination, poor community understanding of LGBTQIA+ needs, and high rates of marginalization, bullying, harassment and violence (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] 2015). For example, during the 2011 Queensland floods, LGBTQIA+ peoples experienced stress, anxiety and depression, fears of prejudice and/or abuse, and reluctance to seek mainstream emergency services due to fears of lack of safety, accessibility and inclusivity in heteronormative spaces that privileged non-queer peoples (Gorman-Murray et al. 2017). Worryingly, some Australian governments outsource emergency response and recovery arrangements to faith-based Christian organizations with legal exemption from anti-discrimination protections (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon 2016). Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon (2014) posit that at all Australian levels (national, state and territory), recovery plans are not gender-sensitive and that literature regarding gender and climate change perpetuates binary, heteronormative constructions of gender, overlooking experiences of LGBTQIA+ peoples.

### Access and inclusion

Existing discrimination, marginalisation and isolation exacerbate climate vulnerability for people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage; and access to resources and services is a social justice issue in the context of climate change. The CHWAI found that rural and remote communities have 'reduced access to services and infrastructure, particularly during emergencies and times of disaster, as well as limited capacity to rebuild in the aftermath', and this worsens 'when communities are hit by another extreme weather event during the recovery phase' (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, 58). People experiencing homelessness may also be asked to leave air-conditioned places like shopping centres and libraries during summer (Weeramanthri et al. 2020).

Migrants can be unfamiliar with or ill-prepared for local hazards such as heatwaves and extreme weather events, and due to social isolation and language barriers and limited 'access to information, community networks or financial resources', they may lack capacity to prepare and respond (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, 53). Similar issues were identified in other Australian studies (Bell and Blashki 2014; Hansen et al. 2013; Sevoyan et al. 2013); for example, Hansen et al. (2013) found that during heat waves, new migrants may avoid public air-conditioned spaces such as shopping centers, may be at risk at beaches and swimming pools if unable to swim, and may experience 'discomfort, anguish, sunburn and the potential for severe health impacts' (3).

When considering age, children are particularly vulnerable to climate change as their physiological systems develop, with increased risk of chronic illness, higher susceptibility to stressors, and climate anxiety (Weeramanthri et al. 2020). Climate events can affect Australian children's physical, psychological and behavioural development (Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015); for example, financial difficulties from drought can restrict rural children's education access (Alston 2011). Disaster evacuation centers with shared sleeping areas and volunteer carers may also pose child protection risks (Bell and Blashki 2014). Similarly, the CHWAI reported that older people in WA are more vulnerable to temperature extremes and are 'less able to mobilise if required' (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, 53). They are also vulnerable to climate events such as bushfires due to reliance on others to evacuate (Hansen et al. 2013; Horton, Hanna, and Kelly 2010; Sevoyan et al. 2013). Furthermore, during climate events, elderly migrants, particularly those with low English proficiency, may have greater support needs (Loughnan and Carroll 2015), and may experience linguistic and social isolation with reduced access to English-language preventative health messages that privilege non-CaLD Australians (Hansen et al. 2013). Post-disaster scammers also target elderly Australians (Bell and Blashki 2014).

The CHWAI also reported that people with disability have reduced capacity to respond quickly to climate events as they are 'more likely to be reliant on technology, prescription medicine and specialised medical equipment' (Weeramanthri et al. 2020, 52). People with disability are at heightened risk from climate events, especially extreme heat and cold (Hughes, Hanna, and Fenwick 2016; Walker 2015) and during severe emergency evacuation procedures; particularly children with disability (Boon et al. 2012). Challenges also arise regarding the care of people with disability before, during and after extreme events (Bell and Blashki 2014).

## Implications

The examined literature suggests that marginalised Western Australians have varied experiences and risks under climate change. As such, climate policy should address multiple and intersecting inequalities (Gaard 2015; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014). However, it is well-documented that climate change policies across Australia do not address the human rights of marginalised peoples in all their diversities (Alston 2011; Arabena and Kingsley 2015; Bell and Blashki 2014; Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon 2014; Hansen et al. 2013; Parkinson, Farrant, and Duncan 2015; Porter et al. 2020; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013; Walker and Mason 2015). Furthermore, marginalised peoples and communities tend to be excluded from developing climate change-related policy and from climate decision-making bodies (Alston 2011; Arabena and Kingsley 2015; Caball and Malekpour 2019; Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon 2014; MacCallum, Byrne, and Steele 2014). In the next section, we analyse social justice and WA climate policy.

## Social justice analysis of the WA climate policy

To undertake a social justice analysis of the WA Climate Policy, we assessed the process of policy development and policy content. We applied a content analysis by open coding the Issues Paper, Consultation Summary, and Policy, and examining submissions from social justice organisations, to identify a) whom the Policy envisaged benefitting and participating (procedural justice); and b) what the policy seeks to distribute (distributive justice). We were aided by Maughan, Anderson, and Kneafsey's (2020) framework for 'reading for social justice' to explore five questions:

- (1) Does the policy enable distribution to the most marginalized?
- (2) Does the policy attempt to build alliances across boundaries?
- (3) Does the policy address spatial and temporal injustice?
- (4) Does the policy prefigure democratic participation?
- (5) Does the policy process create space for reflexivity?

## Procedural justice

The WA Climate Policy development included a 12-week public consultation period commencing on 3 September 2019, for interested individuals and organisations to provide feedback on an Issues Paper outlining WA climate change issues and opportunities

(DWER 2019). Submitters were invited to respond to 39 questions across 11 areas: transforming energy generation; industry innovation; future mobility; regional prosperity; waste reduction; safe and healthy communities; water security; liveable towns and cities; resilient infrastructure and businesses; protecting biodiversity; and, strengthening adaptive capacity. The Consultation Summary (DWER 2020b) reports that 3,758 submissions were received, of which 506 were from individuals, businesses and peak groups, and 3,252 were pro forma submissions (with standardised text) from individuals through four campaigns from environment groups. Most submissions were from individuals (56%), followed by non-government organisations (13%), academia (6%) and government bodies (6%); and 64% came from Perth metropolitan area, with only 18% from regional areas. The main area of the Issues Paper to consider social justice was 'Safe and healthy communities'. Prompting consultation questions included, 'What are the main climate risks for your household or your community? What can be done to manage these risks?; What are your biggest concerns about Western Australia's future climate?; and, What could be done to ensure your community is better prepared for possible climate impacts?' (DWER 2019, 17).

Only a handful of submissions came from social justice-oriented organisations, including AHCWA (2019c), WA Department of Communities (DoC (2019)), and WACOSS (2019c). These submissions highlight the limited social justice focus and scope of the consultation process. For example, AHCWA (2019c) stated that the Issues Paper 'demonstrates a lack of awareness about the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Aboriginal people, [and] also neglects the expertise and knowledge that Aboriginal people can bring to developing solutions to climate change challenges' (p.2). AHCWA identified various social justice and climate issues, such as the interconnectedness of environment and health; the impacts of extreme weather on people experiencing homelessness; the loss of bush tucker (native foods); and infrastructure issues to deliver services to remote Aboriginal communities. The Climate Policy's (DWER 2020a) only claim to Aboriginal consultation was in regard to carbon farming on WA's pastoral lease lands.

The DoC (2019) submission also discussed services for Aboriginal communities, but mainly focused on land development and housing, including renewable energy and water efficiency in social housing. This is despite the Department being responsible for a wide range of social justice issues, such as child protection, family and domestic violence, community services, disability services, seniors, housing, and youth. In contrast, WACOSS (2019c), as the peak body for the community sector, discussed a range of climate change inequalities, including poverty and climate

vulnerability; food insecurity; access to climate appropriate housing; affordable and accessible transportation; water supply; and community sector resilience. The Consultation Summary report's main mention of social justice was:

Submissions highlighted the effects of climate change on health and wellbeing, such as impacts to mental health, vulnerable groups and standards of living. Some submissions noted that existing social and economic inequities will exacerbate the effects of climate change on the health of some people in the community (DWER 2020b, 6).

Despite some submitters raising a wide range of social justice issues related to climate change, the narrow consultation scope limited their inclusion in the Policy.

### *Distributive justice*

On 30 November 2020, the WA Government released its long-awaited Climate Policy. The Policy articulates the government's aspiration (not commitment) of net-zero emissions by 2050 while fostering climate change adaptation and climate resilience. The vision is 'to harness Western Australia's innovation and wealth of natural and mineral resources to achieve net zero emissions and ensure a prosperous, resilient future for all Western Australians' (DWER 2020a, 13). The Policy presents actions across six themes: Clean manufacturing and future industries; Transforming energy generation and use; Storing carbon and caring for our landscapes; Lower-carbon transport; Resilient cities and regions; and, Government leadership. It includes new technological and job creating initiatives including an AU\$21 million Electric Vehicle strategy, an AU \$100 million contribution to a 100-megawatt big battery, and AU\$56.3 million solar power investments. This builds on other WA Government announcements in 2020, including the WA Renewable Hydrogen Strategy and Roadmap and financing; the AU\$60 million Green Jobs Plan; funding renewable energy technologies; and an AU\$16 million Clean Energy Future Fund.

The Policy and accompanying announcements emphasise technological interventions, while the social elements and justice issues raised through CHWAI and submissions are scarcely included. The word 'people' is only mentioned once in the 38-page policy document, and there is no meaningful discussion about communities most vulnerable to climate change. One general proposal is for a Climate Resilient Action Plan 2022–2025 to 'Develop a coordinated, collaborative plan to support Western Australian industries, cities and regions to identify and manage climate impacts and enhance climate resilience' (DWER 2020a, 25). No funds are allocated to this process, nor to the actual

implementation of the plan (and at the time of publication of this article, the WA government had not yet developed this plan). To further examine distributive justice within the Policy, our content analysis through reading for social justice is organised by the themes from the literature review.

- **First Nations peoples:** The Policy contains four references to Aboriginal people and communities. It suggests that developing WA's carbon offset markets can 'deliver economic opportunities' (DWER 2020a, 20) to Traditional Owners undertaking savanna burning programs, while a carbon farming program can boost Aboriginal employment. The Policy also commits to deploying Standalone Power Systems to more remote Aboriginal communities.
- **Health and wellbeing:** 'Health' is mentioned 24 times in the Policy, for 'safeguarding the health and resilience of our community' (DWER 2020a, 10). Dedicated actions include establishing the sustainable development unit in the WA Department of Health, and undertaking reforms to mitigate the health system's environmental footprint and 'plan and implement adaptations to reduce health risks of climate change' (p.27); with no funds or further information provided. Mental health is not mentioned.
- **Economic justice:** The Policy refers to 'jobs' 23 times, focussing on creating low carbon jobs in industries such as renewable hydrogen, clean energy and carbon farming. AU\$20 million is provided for the regional Collie community's Just Transition from coal-fired power and coal extraction, while AU\$22 million is allocated to the renewable hydrogen industry, including supporting a private mining company to develop hydrogen-fuelled transport. [Incidentally, 'hydrogen' is mentioned 58 times in the Policy]. A laudable social justice action is to 'Provide assistance to households, including those in energy retailer hardship programs, to enhance energy efficiency and reduce energy costs' (DWER 2020a, 30). The Policy also includes actions for energy-efficient social housing through requiring a higher energy rating for new social housing dwellings; refurbishing 1,500 existing dwellings for improved energy and water efficiency; and, delivering solar photovoltaic systems to 500 dwellings (a small proportion of DoC's 51,000 housing dwellings [DoC 2019]). The Policy also enhances clean public transport but evades issues of transport access and affordability.
- **Gender and sexuality:** The Policy and consultation documents do not include any language or actions related to gender or sexuality.

- Access and inclusion: Regional communities are mentioned 29 times in the Policy, the only access and inclusion consideration. References include climate-resilient jobs and industries in regional communities, safeguarding regional water infrastructure, and deploying battery energy storage to the regions. Another action is to ‘Support regional local governments to drive action on climate change, energy and sustainability through regional partnerships’ (DWER 2020a, 25). Children, young and older people, migrants and people with disability are not mentioned.

### Whither justice?

Informed by hooks’ critical and intersectional feminist lens, our social justice policy analysis suggests that WA climate politics reflects a dominant neoliberal patriarchal emphasis on technological interventions for decarbonisation, climate change adaptation, and resilience-building, with inadequate focus on reducing the vulnerability and upholding the rights of marginalised communities. While the WA Government has outlined and accepted climate risks through the CHWAI (Weeramanthri et al. 2020), the Policy has no commensurate scale of action to prevent climate catastrophe through a just approach to urgent and rapid emissions reduction and climate change adaptation – and to date, the WA Government also lacks supplementary policies that may consider climate and social justice issues, including a climate adaptation strategy. The Policy fails to leverage significant public support for ambitious climate action (Leviston, Greenhill, and Walker 2015), and does not set emissions reduction targets or plan for emissions reduction across the State or per sector, and financial commitments for new renewable technologies are very modest (Conservation Council of WA [CCWA] 2020).

It is also evident that the Policy fails to adequately enable distribution to marginalised peoples and address spatial and temporal injustices. In contrast to significant technology development, actions for carbon farming, land restoration, community batteries and social housing energy efficiency are small scale, with limited commitment to ensuring these technologies benefit people who are vulnerable to climate change, such as low-income communities. Although timed to kick-start WA’s COVID-19 recovery, the Policy overlooks equitable distribution of technologies or jobs to support people economically excluded by the pandemic, such as people with disability. The Policy’s inclusion of regional job and infrastructure development also ignores issues of limited regional social services for communities experiencing climate impacts (WACOSS 2019a). Despite overwhelming evidence of climate vulnerable groups (Weeramanthri et al. 2020), the Policy minimally focuses on Aboriginal peoples and low-income communities, and does not mention women,

children, young people, older people, migrants, LGBTQIA+ people, or people with disability – nor climate inequalities exacerbated by the intersections of these identities. This is a significant gap that must be addressed in future supplementary policies regarding climate adaptation and resilience.

From a procedural justice perspective, the Policy development process did not encourage and facilitate the participation of social justice organisations and climate vulnerable communities, which contrasts greatly with the CHWAI. It appears that CHWAI submissions and social justice findings were not robustly examined or included in the Policy. We also identify that Policy implementation includes very limited *public* investment in climate change mitigation and adaptation. The WA Government appears to rely on (and support) the ‘goodwill’ of the private market it seeks to stimulate. This approach exemplifies the global trend of corporatisation and undermines governmental responsibilities to uphold the rights of its citizens (MacGregor 2014).

The omnipotence of the fossil fuel industry causes issues for the WA Government’s climate governance. Planned extraction and consumption of gas as a transition fuel will severely outweigh any reductions achieved through the Policy (Hare, Fuentes, and Chapman 2020). Resource industries also pose significant threats to Aboriginal culture, spirituality, physical, and general wellbeing (Birch 2016) – with WA Government-sanctioned destruction of Aboriginal rock art and sacred site Juukan Gorge (Rio Tinto 2020) and Murujuga, the Burrup Peninsula (350 Boorloo: Perth 2020), as standout examples. Some reports suggest that it can be difficult for Aboriginal groups to oppose and divest from fossil fuel projects and barriers include gag clauses in Native Title agreements and fear of jeopardising relationships with the WA Government or resource companies (350 Boorloo: Perth 2020; Birch 2016).

To bring justice to WA’s climate policies, we argue that climate organisations must explicitly acknowledge that capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (among other ideologies), upheld by neoliberal democracy, are the causes of climate change. However, the Climate Justice Union (CJU) is the only WA organisation actively mainstreaming justice in the climate conversation and bringing climate to social and health services (CJU 2021). For example, CJU brings science-based evidence about climate impacts to advocacy groups, and it links climate with mental health and wellbeing, and solidarity with First Nations peoples and queer folks. More justice-oriented advocacy and activism are needed to transform the business-as-usual approach to climate change in WA.

### Conclusion

The evidence and analysis in this article lead us to conclude that WA climate governance is ill-prepared, if not unwilling, to adequately support people who experience

disadvantage and are on the frontlines of the climate crisis. It is clear that data alone, no matter how comprehensive, will not drive the WA Government to commit to the scale and depth of action required to stave off catastrophic climate change and ensure that no one is left behind. The grip of the fossil fuel industry and the techno-optimistic and capitalist ideology in WA climate governance are, for now, too strong. The prevailing dissonance between evidence and policy in WA highlights the need for climate justice policies and actions that address multiple dimensions of inequality across climate change mitigation, adaptation, and disaster response.

Returning to hooks' structural critique, we posit that critical intersectional feminist perspectives can shed light on injustices related to climate change, and expose inadequacies in WA's dithering climate policy and governance. To enhance climate justice, we need more intersectional approaches to policy analysis and action (Kajiser and Kronsell 2014), and climate solutions that are decolonial (Whyte 2017), and governed by ecological feminisms (Foster 2021; Gaard 2015). Importantly, WA climate justice activists argue for structural change from exploitation and colonialism to justice and solidarity (CJU 2021). Such a shift requires a radical transformation of extractive and hierarchical relationships between people and planet, and a commitment to tackling intersecting climate injustices through every sector of policy and practice. Sadly, the WA Government's Climate Policy fails to respond to the scale and breadth of the climate challenge, despite its own evidence of the need for action. Unless climate justice is pursued, it is feared that the climate crisis will continue to unfold in WA, and social justice will be increasingly unattainable.

## Note

1. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 'Country' is often used to describe lands, waterways and seas. It contains 'complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity' (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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