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ACTION NEXUS

for Economic and Climate Justice

ADVOCACY BRIEF

System Change for People and Planet: Decolonial Feminist Proposals on Climate, Debt and Care

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INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis is a direct outcome of the current dominant neoliberal economic system, which relies on extractivism in many forms. This is not limited to the extraction of material resources; it is also tied closely with extraction of labor and works together with structures of oppression. A core example of this is the fact that contributions of care, which is feminized, are not formalized, recognized nor measured, yet always assumed: any cutbacks on social spending (austerity or fiscal consolidation policies) rely on that informal contribution to cover the gap.

Addressing the climate crisis requires system change, not just in the ways that oppressive systems operate in extracting wealth and resources, but also in the ways we define and recognize value. This is why feminist climate justice advocates see climate justice, racial justice, economic justice, gender and social justice as interlinked and inseparable. A guiding mantra since the Beijing+25 review process has been **#FeministsWantSystemChange**.

This brief outlines the relationship between climate, colonization, and militarization, alongside language that can be used for advocacy towards key policy interventions to support a care economy. Its central tenet is that **the money needed to invest in climate solutions can be sourced through changes in the way we manage our economies; and our economies must be clear in the need to centrally value and build policy around care**. The care-centered economy fundamental to feminist demands can and should be paid for through these systemic economic shifts—which will in turn lead to benefits both in terms of reducing emissions and environmental damage as well as limiting the impacts of conflict on communities.

A DECOLONIAL VIEW OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

It is necessary for human survival to transition out of the fossil fuel based economy and to restructure our systems of trade to enable more local and small producers. The lack of climate action for transitioning away from fossil fuels in the last three decades has shown that the issue is political will, and the problem is a symptom of a systemic issue. **The way that capitalism interacts with patriarchy and other systems of oppression, such as white supremacy, is crucial to seeing the racial, class, caste and gendered dimensions of the climate crisis**. Global South countries that are most affected and historically contributed the least to global emissions are simultaneously limited by the financial system that keeps them trapped in debt, while relying on industries that are extractive and environmentally harmful.¹

Colonialism, in the 19th and 20th centuries in particular, established many systems and categories that we take for granted today. For example, the colonial conquest of land and the introduction of

¹ See ActionAid (2023): [The Vicious Cycle](#).

plantations—such as cotton in North America, sugar in the Caribbean, teak in Southeast Asia, or tea and coffee in South America, Africa and South Asia—goes hand-in-hand with the development of the modern economic system. This system extracts and creates monocultures that are destructive to local indigenous species, and is dependent on different forms of violence. This includes the violence in bringing labor to these sites and keeping that labor force ‘productive.’ It also includes ecosystem violence that destroys forests for farming, or cuts through new routes, such as the Panama and Suez Canals—with serious implications for biodiversity.²

Accounting for historic emissions usually starts with data from the middle of the 19th century, in line with the Industrial Revolution.³ Shipping and railway lines developed from this imperial period were geared towards the extraction, processing, transport and use of fossil fuels. Today, these shipping lines contribute more emissions than the airline industry.⁴ Here another key contributor is the military: not only are world militaries together contributing at least 6 percent of global emissions,⁵ the U.S. military stands as the largest single contributor.⁶



[Map of US Military Bases around the World, by UBIQUE: American Geographical Society, 2024.](#)

- 2 [Leave it in the ground! How fossil fuel extraction affects biodiversity](#)
- 3 [Analysis: Which countries are historically responsible for climate change? - Carbon Brief](#)
- 4 [Maritime shipping causes more greenhouse gases than airlines](#)
- 5 [World's militaries avoiding scrutiny over emissions, scientists say](#); See also CFFP & WEDO (2023): [Feminist Interventions: Resisting the Militarization of the Climate Crisis \(A Focus on the US and EU\)](#)
- 6 This [government report](#) states that in 2017, the US military used 85 million barrels of fuel at a cost of nearly USD 8.2 billion.

Sites of extraction, whether mining sites, plantations, or ‘Special Economic Zones,’ often rely on military, police or private militias to maintain production and extraction of resources. This ranges from continued military presence on Indigenous land, such as northern Philippines’ Cordillera region,⁷ the presence of nearly 800 US military bases in 80 countries,⁸ or the use of local conflict, such as the Myanmar military’s landgrabbing.⁹ Each conflict context means that in parallel there is use and sale of weapons, which can have long-term consequences: these range from the leakage of the nuclear dome and contamination affecting the Marshall Islands;¹⁰ the contamination of landmines in countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Turkey and Yemen;¹¹ or the use of white phosphorus munitions in Ukraine, Gaza, and Myanmar.¹²

Pushing protection for ‘foreign investment’ through other means such as trade agreements with ‘investor-state dispute settlement’ clauses meant that newly independent nations could not nationalize industries without threat of heavy financial penalties, or of violence. Two well-known examples are the 1967 assassination of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who nationalized the Iranian oil industry, and the 1987 assassination of Burkina Faso president Thomas Sankara, whose successor reversed all his policies, including nationalization of industries, and rejoined the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Through multiple direct interventions and threats, and use of financial policies and creation of sovereign debt, the extractivist systems using colonial era rails, ports and shipping routes remained in place and led to greater accumulation of wealth by multinational companies and institutions associated with this sector.

This historical understanding is important to recognize the colonial dimensions of the climate crisis, and why the dimension of restorative justice and reparations is a crucial aspect of feminist climate justice.

POLICIES FOR SYSTEM CHANGE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Rather than rushing to technological solutions, or using neoliberal financial tools to encourage ‘green’ investments, feminist climate justice calls for interlocking policies that present a holistic approach to care, climate and debt. Recognizing that the kind of economy we need is one that centralizes care and moves away from extractive capitalism, there are several policy proposals that open up much more money for investing in an ecologically sound and community-centered future.

7 [Philippines: Indigenous women impacted by militarization for large-scale mining | World Rainforest Movement](#)

8 [COVID-19: Foreign Military Bases Spread Violence and Virus - WILPF](#)

9 [Military Involved in Massive Land Grabs: Parliamentary Report - Myanmar | ReliefWeb](#)

10 [How the U.S. betrayed the Marshall Islands, kindling the next nuclear disaster - Los Angeles Times](#)

11 [Two decades later and illegal landmines are still stockpiled](#)

12 [What is white phosphorus, and what does it mean that Russia may be using it in Ukraine? - CBS News. Rory McCarthy on a Human Rights Watch report accusing Israel of war crime | World news | The Guardian Burma police ‘used white phosphorous’ on mine protesters - BBC News](#)

DEBT CANCELLATION

The colonial context that sets up the current global order is also where modern nation states emerged from former colonies, and were immediately saddled with debt: a key facet in the maintenance of an extractivist, fossil-fuel based economy. Cancellation of sovereign debt is a longstanding demand from the Global South, and is closely tied with both violence in the form of coups and assassinations, as mentioned above, as well as to the creation and maintenance of conflict as a profitable activity.

Some countries, such as Haiti,¹³ were indebted from their very outset by their colonizers, while other Global South countries were introduced to 'financial hegemony'¹⁴ through neoliberal policies that required them to eliminate protective measures and 'open' up markets to foreign imports. (For a closer look at how climate, debt and the COVID-19 pandemic intersect in the context of Zimbabwe and Kenya, see the Action Nexus [brief on the Triple Crisis](#).)

The debt crisis has deeply intensified in recent decades. Public debt since 2000 has increased five-fold, and the number of countries facing high levels of debt has increased from 22 countries in 2011 to 59 countries in 2022.¹⁵ This has severely limited public spending in affected countries, and pushed further extraction of mineral resources and fossil fuels. Austerity or "fiscal consolidation" measures have meant reduced public expenditure over a long period of time. **Reduced spending on public goods and services disproportionately affects women and girls who rely more on them, which means simultaneously women and girls are providing more informal labor while receiving less in terms of structural support and enduring more environmental harms.** As of 2022, global public debt reached a record USD \$92 trillion, with Global South countries owing almost 30% of the total.¹⁶

Unconditional debt cancellation and effective climate finance flows can be an opportunity to move away from development models that have prioritized growth, industrialisation, trade and the interests of development finance providers. Cancellation of debt would also obviously make public investments possible: current loan conditionalities from the IMF, the World Bank and regional development banks have barred social spending. Instead of trapping 'developing' countries in a cycle of debt payments for these loans, debt cancellation opens up the possibilities of investment in public goods and services and climate action.

¹³ [Haiti faces famine – but its troubles are rooted in a brutal colonial past | Kenneth Mohammed | The Guardian](#)

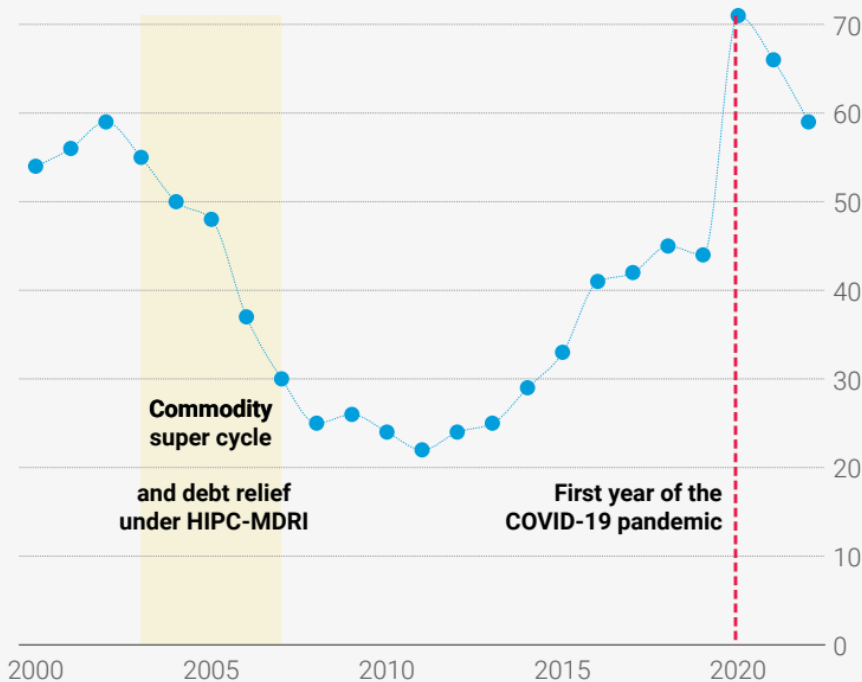
¹⁴ Francesco Saverio Leopardi & Massimiliano Trentin (2022) The international 'debt crisis' of the 1980s in the Middle East and North Africa: a review, an outline, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 58:5, 699-711, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2022.2081560

¹⁵ [A world of debt | UNCTAD](#) See also the Action Nexus [Trends Report](#), published January 2024.

¹⁶ [UN Global Crisis Response Group et al \(2023\): A world of debt](#)

A growing number of countries are facing high levels of debt

Number of developing countries with public debt **exceeding 60% of GDP**



Source: UN Global Crisis Response Group calculations, based on IMF World Economic Outlook (April 2023).
Note: Highly Indebted Poor Countries - Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (HIPC-MDRI).

DEMILITARIZATION

Demilitarization, which would both cover reduction of military spending as well as return of land and closure of military bases, is a key component in both addressing the climate crisis and enabling communities to care for themselves and for the land. Investment in the care sector and in addressing the climate crisis is possible with the redirection of a percentage of the current military budgets of Global North countries. Principles of demilitarization would also apply to reversing securitization measures and policing.

Demilitarization is a crucial path forward for feminists both in the context of climate action and in addressing conflict and delivering on the commitments of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. Many Global South communities, whether the DRC, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Myanmar are often written off as conflict areas and therefore not relevant to intergovernmental policy discussions. However, the choice by Global North governments to intervene, to provide arms and/or military support to chosen factions and otherwise destabilize entire regions is one that should remain visible. Global North governments who are starting to self-label their foreign policy as 'feminist' deserve the scrutiny of feminists and decolonial assessments that focus on structure: **no foreign policy can be labeled feminist if it allows for mining concessions or the provision of weapons.**

Why is the U.S. military contributing so much?

The disproportionate responsibility of the U.S. military and its presence across the world for greenhouse gas emissions is linked to its massive reach: as of 2021, the US military has 750 bases in at least 80 countries worldwide,¹⁷ with a large number of aircraft carriers or “floating bases” and “a significant, and growing, military presence in space.”¹⁸ David Vine, the researcher behind this data, estimates that the U.S. “controls around 95 percent of the world’s foreign bases, thus possessing more bases than any nation, empire, or people in world history.”¹⁹

Vine writes, “Overseas bases have long been a critical, but often overlooked, tool to launch wars and interventions, maintain systems of alliances, keep other nations in subordinate relationships, and maintain a global political-economic military order to the perceived benefit of the United States and its elites.” Not only does this attentiveness to military endeavors show a direct relationship between the issues highlighted in this brief, it demonstrates that the impact of militarization and continued presence of military bases is manifold. For instance, the presence of US military bases account for a high level of gender-based violence, whether in Djibouti, Korea, or Hawaii.²⁰

JUST AND EQUITABLE TRANSITION & ENERGY DEMOCRACY

A **just and equitable transition** would require not just ways forward for retraining and transitioning existing workers in the fossil fuel industry to a new renewable energy sector; it would mean that the new sector has to be public, offering high quality jobs. Advocates would need to be careful about proposals that focus on private sector investments and employment. Instead the focus should be on public investments, nationalizing essential public goods and services that have been privatized and undoing public-private partnerships.²¹

Societies and markets have existed long before capitalism and this era of fossil fuel dependency.²² Some systems of water management date back several centuries and across continents; methods of farming such as crop rotation speak to knowledge and traditions that are not just sustainable, but are caring, not just of people, but of land. Caring for the land—being responsible custodians for lands and water bodies—is an approach and understanding that is central to many Indigenous and First Nations communities.

17 [Infographic: US military presence around the world](#)

18 Vine, David. “12. Islands of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Ethnography of U.S. Empire.” *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*, edited by Carole McGranahan and John F. Collins, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018, p 255. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002086-014>

19 Ibid, p 251

20 [COVID-19: Foreign Military Bases Spread Violence and Virus - WILPF](#); also: [South Korea: Supreme Court Rules Government Responsible for Harm Suffered by Sex Workers in US Military Camp Towns | Library of Congress](#) and [Lawmakers, advocates call on military to do more to address violence against Native Hawaiian women](#)

21 [Public-Private Partnerships: Global Campaign Manifesto - Eurodad 2020 Content Staging](#)

22 [Markets in the Next System](#)

Such approaches acknowledge that the right to water cannot be tied to profiteering, and that large-scale solutions are not always the answer. **Energy democracy** would prioritize small, nano and micro energy options that are sustainable and developed according to community needs, and indeed would be more realistic in delivering energy solutions in geographically complex contexts that a national grid cannot reach. Projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, or trade agreements such as the Trans Pacific Partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor, are not centering the needs of communities, nor are they democratic. They merit transparency, oversight through other branches of government as well as consultations with affected communities.

ECONOMIC POLICIES FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE CARE ECONOMY

The role of women and girls in providing care and reproductive labor is not overtly recognized or measured in traditional economics.²³ Recent efforts through methods such as time-use surveys²⁴ demonstrate that there is a lot of crucial work being done primarily by women and by marginalized peoples. For instance, women make up 70 percent of the global health and social care workforce,²⁵ meaning there are many gendered dimensions to emergency health responses such as in the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶

Policy responses to these gendered divisions have yet to actually value care and reproductive labor as essential to the economy. Responses and recommendations often revolve around increasing women's participation in the formal labor force, or increasing their presence in male-dominated fields, currently with focus on 'STEM' (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Such approaches not only do not value the existing work that is being contributed, but also are taking a limited view. Conversations around the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' and the possibilities of different professions becoming obsolete ignore the fact that many now non-existent professions, especially those that women have dominated, such as clerical work and stenography,²⁷ manual mathematical calculations,²⁸ switchboard operations,²⁹ were in fact in the purview of 'STEM'. These roles were devalued as women began to dominate, and did not cause great concern when many of these jobs became obsolete. While access to education, formal work, and creating space for women in male-dominated sectors is important, so is valuing the existing sectors they dominate.

²³ This is a common critique from leftist and feminist economics, particularly on the use of GDP as a measure of a country's economy, which leaves out important contributions such as caregiving. For instance, see Joseph Stiglitz's article, [GDP Is the Wrong Tool for Measuring What Matters - Scientific American](#)

²⁴ See, for instance the [Equality Insights](#) program and this sample [brief on Individual Deprivation Measure](#) using data from Fiji and Papua New Guinea

²⁵ [COVID-19: a heavy toll on health-care workers - The Lancet Respiratory Medicine](#)

²⁶ Other important gendered dimensions of the pandemic would include the increase in domestic violence, which UN Women described as the 'shadow pandemic': [The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19](#)

²⁷ [Gender & the Office](#)

²⁸ [Human Computers: The Women of NASA](#)

²⁹ [Goodbye to the hello girls: automating the telephone exchange | Science Museum](#)

Solutions for valuing care and reproductive labor should also consider how to build this sector in a way that is sustainable and ecologically sound.³⁰ They should also address the current race, class and caste dimensions, where poorer, migrant and marginalized women are taking up the care and reproductive burdens of urban, upper-class and educated women to enable their entry into formal work.

In all of this, the question of how to pay for good quality jobs in the care, health and education sector is tied closely with the issues of debt, tax and trade justice. Restructuring trade systems, introducing transparent and progressive taxation and canceling debt are some of the ways to ensure greater fiscal space for ensuring investment in social spending as well as transitioning to a renewable energy system that is community-centered.

A common emphasis must be on public investment and maintaining the role of the state, rather than handing over responsibility for the economy to the private sector. Private investment firms are holding the majority of debt of countries such as Zambia³¹ and Sri Lanka³², and are less likely than multilateral creditors to cancel or restructure debt payments. **The climate crisis cannot be addressed by relying on the private sector; instead, it requires public investment in locally-specific solutions.** The care sector also suffers when its private owners speculate with property or takes advantage of public funding and charges high private fees to make exorbitant profits.³³ It is important overall to bring our focus to creating high quality public sector jobs: this would include not just creating more jobs, but bolstering existing jobs so that they are better paid, long-term, more flexible and conducive to families and different ages, and come with better benefits (i.e. tied in with social security provisions such as pensions that are not exclusively tied to one kind of job only). Measures such as nationalizing, despite being outside of the neoliberal economic orthodoxy, became possible during the COVID-19 pandemic³⁴ and should be revisited as part of our feminist demands.

ENDING—AND REVERSING—AUSTERITY

Reversing, rather than putting on hold, cuts to public sectors in the name of austerity or fiscal consolidation measures is fundamental. **Austerity measures have always assumed the invisible contributions of care work at home, largely by women: to close or cut funding to daycare, schools, or care homes is to assume that feminized labor is omnipresent.** Many countries have seen a generation or more of austerity measures, and ending or simply removing them does not address the harm done. Undoing the damage of decades of such policies means the necessity of large-scale investments in public health, education, transport, water and sanitation and other sectors particularly essential for women, girls and gender non-conforming people.

³⁰ For more on this, see the [FemGND issue brief on Care & Climate](#)

³¹ [BlackRock urged to delay debt repayments from crisis-torn Zambia](#)

³² [Analysis: Sri Lanka bondholders brace for big losses in debt restructuring | Reuters](#)

³³ [Huge profits and low taxes. Care home real estate business put in the spotlight by CICTAR](#)

³⁴ For instance, [Spain nationalized all private hospitals](#).

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING AND PUBLIC-CENTERED INFRASTRUCTURE

The push for ‘development’, especially in the Global South, has often gone towards large-scale infrastructure projects that enable the movement of goods across the globe, but not necessarily providing what local communities need. **Building an economy that centralizes care and moves away from extractivist practices would mean more participatory budgeting and planning infrastructure around public needs.** In the context of public infrastructure, participatory budgeting would involve consulting with communities to build the infrastructure that they need, e.g. instead of building highways and bridges that are city-centric, consulting with remote and rural communities to develop transport options that are needed for accessing basic needs, whether that is connecting with markets or accessing quality healthcare and education. Fundamentally, reforms that jointly address climate, debt and care are democratic and community-centered rather than geared towards profit.

RESOURCES

[Feminist Interventions: Resisting the Militarization of the Climate Crisis \(A Focus on the US and EU\)](#)

[This is an incredible visualization of the world's shipping routes - Vox](#)

[The Belt and Road Initiative: Chinese agribusiness going global](#)

[Structural adjustment and the Washington Consensus: are they things of the past?](#)

[New free trade agreements: normalising the brutality of transnational supply chains](#)

[10 Ways That the Climate Crisis and Militarism Are Intertwined - Greenpeace USA](#)

[A beginner's guide to fossil fuel divestment](#)

[Renewable energy and land use: barriers to just transition in the Global South - report](#)

About the Action Nexus

The context for this brief is the commitment of feminist movements who are part of the *Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice* (“Action Nexus”) to develop more resources and materials for popular education and legal advocacy that advance a comprehensive feminist agenda. This feminist agenda is not a separate or new initiative, but a well-articulated one that draws on the work of feminist movements over generations. Our 2021 **Blueprint for Feminist Economic Justice**, a central piece that anchors the Action Nexus, acknowledges how our work mutually reinforces and reaffirms feminist agendas of over five decades and connects movements—including, but not limited to, trade justice, debt justice, and tax justice. More resources as well as the summary of seven key demands of our work can be found on the [Action Nexus webpage](#).