

# Environmental injustice closely tied to gender violence, new study argues

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Environmental justice and gender violence may seem like separate issues, but a new paper from a University of New Mexico professor argues that the two are closely linked.

Miriam Gay-Antaki, assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, recently published "Embodied geographies of environmental justice: Toward the sovereign right to wholly inhabit oneself" in *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. The paper draws on her field work investigating environmental interventions in Mexico and the global South.

The paper explores the connection between two traditionally separate areas of scholarship—environmental justice and reproductive justice—in a critique of capitalism's damaging impact on environments and the people and cultures who live in them. When a community's land is threatened, be it by air pollution, climate disasters or gentrification, the group has also experienced reproductive injustice, because their collective ability to envision a positive future has been threatened.

"My intention is that Environmental Justice scholarship center gender and sexuality to incorporate the body through a Latin American concept of 'cuerpo-territorio,' a concept that blends geography, territory and the body," Gay-Antaki said. "By blurring the lines between the public and private we emphasize the role of the state and global capitalism in the subjugation of the environment, [women](#) and people of color. By asking who reproduces, what is reproduced, and where, in environmental justice work, we underscore that environmental matters are reproductive, and the disproportionate embodied consequences of environmental injustices on sexualized, gendered and racialized bodies."

Research and discussion on environmental justice have long explored the correlation between environmental disasters and issues of race and class, but little research has investigated the topic's connection to gender and sexuality.

Mexico has been particularly affected by environmental problems caused by factories and other large developments. In a one-month span

last year, 83 women were reported missing in the state of Nuevo Leon, Mexico. The disappearances and murders, often explained away as isolated incidents or results of a violent culture, are inherently related to the environmental impacts of the exploitation of land, Gay-Antaki argues in her paper.

"In the paper, I've underscored the historical processes that have rendered spaces, mostly in the global South, as sacrificial zones for capital expansion; it is in these spaces where environments are destroyed alongside the livelihoods of people that inhabit them," Gay-Antaki said. "These impact women of color disproportionately because what ends up happening is if you're living in contaminated sites, your body occupies a contaminated environment; then the ability for you to have a hopeful future, to want to have children, is inhibited by the space that you are inhabiting."

## **Environmental justice**

Floods, hurricanes, and oil spills, just a few examples of environmental issues, are often discussed as isolated incidents. Air pollution caused by a factory may have negative health implications for people in the area, but it can also create an environment difficult to imagine a future.

These lesser-discussed effects of environmental damage make the decision to have children, and therefore continue the practices of the impacted culture, more difficult, according to Gay-Antaki.

"Environmental injustices are not only damaging environments and people of color, but they are damaging women's and communities' ability to reproduce their own culture and tradition and thus their ability to be different than the mainstream," Gay-Antaki said.

In this way, environmental injustices are also reproductive injustices.

She uses the concept of cuerpo-territorio, translated as body-land or territory, to bring the two traditionally separate disciplines into scholarly conversation.

"Thinking about cuerpo-territorio immediately forces you to consider reproductive rights," Gay-Antaki said. "Environmental injustices don't just damage the land, but they damage the bodies in that land, so [gender violence](#) has to be thought of as an environmental justice issue because bodies are connected to the land."

## **Reproductive rights and justice**

In the same way problems in the physical environment impact communities' capacity to express culture and envision a positive future, gender violence and other reproductive justice issues can often be tied to the history of the land impacted people occupy, according to the paper.

"Gender violence also has to be thought of as a process that alienates people from their geography, from their land," she said. "When we think about gender violence as this individual or private act, we fail to recognize this concept of cuerpo-territorio, how terrorizing of women's bodies is also opening space for capitalistic expansion."

It's important to Gay-Antaki that academic conversations about gender violence consider how the environment has been impacted by disaster and industry. Women, people of color and queer people are especially vulnerable in areas that have been conquered for economic pursuits, according to the paper.

Gender violence may be considered one symptom of environmental injustice, but problems in the environment have additional repercussions.

Liberal Western conversations around reproductive rights often center

around access to contraception and abortion.

"Women's empowerment under a capitalist framework must be understood within an intersectional feminist lens as it illuminates how those women who manage to climb the capitalist structure can do so only at the expense of other women fulfilling social reproductive roles," Gay-Antaki said.

Examination of reproductive choices faced on a global scale leads to other questions. Drawing from the work of activists like SisterSong and Loretta Ross, Gay-Antaki utilized a definition of reproductive justice that includes not only the right to decide whether or not to have children but also the right to parent.

## **Changing the conversation**

Gay-Antaki said she would like to see the paper help lay the groundwork for the inclusion of gender and sexuality in discussions of environmental justice. She would also like to make space in academic conversation for the voices of people most impacted.

The paper includes "War Cry," a poem by Cherrie Moraga, and "El violador es tu," a song from LasTesis, a women's movement in Chile, to bring in the voices of women of color and people from the global South.

"What ends up happening a lot in environmental justice literature is often places are described as sort of hopeless wastelands and I'm trying to highlight that even people living in spaces labeled as such have the capacity and potential to want better for themselves, their children and their communities," says Gay-Antaki.

After all, the right to a hopeful future is central to the intersection of environmental and reproductive justice.

**More information:** Miriam Gay-Antaki, Embodied geographies of environmental justice: Toward the sovereign right to wholly inhabit oneself, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/25148486231151802](https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486231151802)

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