# A Gendered Burden of Care? Examining the Social and Psychological Determinants of Climate Anxiety and its Mobilization in Youth Activism

**Riya Kataria***

* Student, Department of Education, Manav Rachna University, India
E-Mail: katariariya749@gmail.com
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***Abstract***:

*This study investigates the gendered dimensions of climate anxiety and its role in mobilizing youth activism. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates sociology, psychology, and political science, the research examines how social factors, such as caregiving responsibilities and media portrayals, excessively burden young women with the emotional weight of climate change. Moving beyond a completely psychological perspective, this paper argues that climate anxiety is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by gendered roles and their expectations. Through an analysis of qualitative data from interviews with youth activists, this paper explores the hypothesis that climate anxiety, while distressing, serves as a powerful catalyst for social mobilization. The findings reveal how the emotional labour of processing climate change compels young women to engage in specific forms of activism, such as community organizing and grassroots advocacy, which may differ from male-dominated, formal political action. The study concludes that understanding the gendered nature of climate emotion is essential for comprehending the dynamics of the contemporary climate movement and for developing more effective strategies for both mental health support and political engagement. This research offers crucial insights for policymakers and non-governmental organizations aiming to foster more equitable and resilient climate action. Ultimately, this paper serves as a call to recognize and address the emotional burden disproportionately borne by young women in the fight for a habitable future.*

**Keywords:** *Climate Anxiety, Gender, Youth Activism, Social movements, Emotional labour.*

## Introduction:

The growing planetary crisis has brought about a time of significant psychological stress, referred to as climate anxiety. While this issue is often seen as an individual response to an external threat, this paper argues that its experience and expression are deeply social, and specifically gendered. Climate anxiety is not just a universal fear; it is a real emotional burden that affects different people based on their societal roles and expectations. This study contests a purely psychological view and claims that

young women disproportionately bear the emotional weight of climate change. This burden comes from societal roles that have long assigned them the duty of caregiving. This paper aims to explore how this emotional weight, while distressing, can also drive social mobilization and political action.

The climate crisis has sparked one of the most energetic social movements in recent years, mostly led by young people. From the school strikes organized by Greta Thunberg to numerous grassroots groups forming around the world, youth are at the helm of a movement that demands a liveable future. However, a closer examination of this activism shows that participation and leadership roles are not the same for everyone. Anecdotal evidence and new research indicate that young women often act as the emotional core of this movement, managing both their own environmental grief and the effort to motivate others and keep communities engaged. This study investigates this overlooked aspect, aiming to understand how gendered emotional experiences related to climate change influence youth activism. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines sociology, psychology, and political science, this research looks into the links between climate anxiety, gender roles, and activism.

By analysing qualitative data from in-depth interviews with young activists, this paper examines how social factors like media representation and caregiving duties at home heighten the emotional strain on young women. We believe that this burden drives them to take part in different kinds of activism, such as community organizing and relational advocacy, which might differ from the formal, often male-dominated, actions like lobbying and policy discussions. The results of this research will provide a deeper understanding of the current climate movement and offer valuable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and activists, all of whom need to work towards fairer and more resilient climate action

## 2. Literature Review

The idea of climate anxiety has changed from a new term to a recognized area of psychological research (Pihkala, 2020). Early studies in psychology aimed to define this phenomenon and its clinical signs, often viewing it as a type of generalized anxiety or eco-distress. However, critics have pointed out that this focus on individuals ignores the social context in which people feel these emotions (Jones, 2021). Our study is based on a sociological view that emotions are not just internal states; they are shaped by social interactions, cultural norms, and power dynamics (Thoits, 1989). We suggest that climate anxiety is a socially shaped emotional response influenced by society's gender expectations. This view is rooted in ecofeminism, which highlights the links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (Mies & Shiva, 1993). This framework argues that patriarchal systems exploit both women and the environment, resulting in shared oppression. While some

ecofeminist ideas face criticism for their essentialist views, their main insight—that the health of the planet and the status of women are closely linked—remains relevant. Research shows that women often report greater environmental concern and engage in more eco-friendly behaviors than men (Blocker & Eckberg, 1989). This gender gap in environmental attitudes often connects to social expectations that women act as caretakers of their homes, children, and communities. Amid a global environmental crisis, this "caretaker role" extends to the planet, creating a heavy emotional responsibility that places a greater burden of climate anxiety on women. A key concept for understanding this situation is emotional labor. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild first introduced this term in 1983 to describe managing one's feelings at work, but it has since expanded to include the unseen work of managing others' emotions in both public and private spaces. This study argues that young women take on the emotional labor of dealing with climate change for their families, friends, and communities. They often communicate the urgency of the crisis, provide emotional support to upset friends, and foster hope in difficult times. This invisible and unpaid work adds to their emotional burden and is a crucial way in which climate anxiety is shaped by gender. Additionally, how the media portrays climate change impacts this gendered experience. Studies have shown that women are often depicted as victims of environmental disasters, frequently shown with their children. This imagery strengthens their portrayal as vulnerable caregivers (Gidengil & Everitt, 2011). Such framing can deepen the emotional impact of the climate crisis on young women, reinforcing their anxiety and sense of responsibility. Lastly, social movement theory has looked closely at emotions in activism (Jasper, 1998), but few studies have examined how a gendered emotional burden leads to different forms of activism. We think that because climate anxiety is closely tied to care and responsibility for young women, it drives them toward relational forms of activism, such as community organizing, educational efforts, and grassroots advocacy. This differs from more traditional, male-oriented political actions, like lobbying and formal policymaking, which often stress rationality and strategic negotiation over emotional expression and community involvement. This research aims to connect the psychology of climate anxiety with the sociology of social movements, providing a more complete understanding of current climate activism that considers gender differences.

## 3. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to provide a detailed and human-centred understanding of how gender influences climate anxiety and activism. The research followed a constructivist approach, recognizing that participants lived experiences and emotional realities are shaped by their

social context and are not the same for everyone. The main method for gathering data was semi-structured interviews, which offered the flexibility needed to explore sensitive and personal topics. This approach allowed participants to steer the conversation and share their unique stories, uncovering details that a strict, quantitative survey would miss. A purposive sample of 25 youth climate activists, aged 18-25, was recruited from various climate action groups and non-profits across North America. To make sure we had a balanced view, the sample included 15 young women and 10 young men. Participants were recruited through digital platforms popular among youth activists, such as Instagram and Discord. We also used a snowball sampling technique, where initial participants referred others from their circles. This method helped us gather individuals who were deeply involved in the climate movement, providing genuine and informed perspectives. All participants gave informed consent, and interviews took place virtually through video conferencing platforms to ensure convenience and accessibility, which was especially important for student activists with busy lives. The interview protocol was designed to be open-ended and sensitive. It focused on three main areas: participants' personal feelings about climate change, their reasons for activism, and their views on gender roles within the climate movement. Key interview questions included: "How does thinking about climate change make you feel, and has that feeling changed over time?", "Can you describe your journey into activism and what keeps you motivated?", and "In your experience, do you see any differences in how young women and men engage or lead in the climate movement?" All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, professionally transcribed, and anonymized to protect participant identities and ensure confidentiality. The data was analysed using a systematic thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved carefully reading each transcript to immerse ourselves in the data, followed by creating initial codes. These codes were then organized into broader themes and sub-themes, and a final review was done to ensure the themes accurately represented the data and answered the research questions.

## 4. Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed a rich variety of experiences. This confirmed the study's main hypothesis and highlighted the complex relationship between gender, emotion, and activism. The findings are organized into four main themes that turn up from the data.

### 4.1 The Weight of Caregiving: From Home to the Planet

Nearly all young women interviewed described their climate anxiety in relational terms. They connected their emotional burden to a sense of care and responsibility for others. This contrasted with the narratives of male activists, who often framed their concerns as policy failures or scientific

urgency. Maria (22), a community organizer, expressed this powerfully: “It’s not just a fear of the future. It’s a fear for my little sister. I look at her and I think, ‘What kind of world am I leaving her?’ That’s what keeps me up at night.” This feeling of personal responsibility extended beyond family to their local communities. Sarah (20), a leader in a local climate group, explained, “I feel like I have to be the one to check in on people. To see if they’re okay. The emotional work of organizing is a huge part of my anxiety. It’s not just about the planet; it’s about taking care of the people in the movement, too.” This emotional labor, often overlooked, was cited as a major source of both motivation and exhaustion.

### 4.2 Media and the Emotional Burden

The portrayal of climate change in the media was a significant trigger for the emotional burden women experienced. Many young women described how media narratives, often focusing on vulnerable women and children in climate-affected areas, resonated with them emotionally. Anya (19), a student activist, shared, “When I see a picture of a mother holding her baby in a flood, it’s not just an image. It feels personal. It’s like I feel her burden, and that just increases my anxiety. It’s a very visceral, empathetic response.” In contrast, male activists were more likely to express their emotional response to media as a call for intellectual or strategic action. David (23), a policy intern, stated, “I see a graph of rising CO2 emissions and I think, ‘Okay, how do we fix this? What policy needs to be changed?’ It’s more about problem-solving than feeling.” This difference shows how media consumption, shaped by gender norms, can lead to different emotional responses.

### 4.3 From Paralysis to Political Action

A key finding of this study is that climate anxiety, for young women, is not a paralyzing force but a strong motivator for action. While they acknowledge the distress and overwhelm, they framed it as “fuel” for activism. Layla (24), a grassroots organizer, summarized this view: “The fear can be overwhelming, but it’s that feeling that makes me get out there and do something. It turns from a personal feeling into a political one. My anxiety is my motivation.” This challenges the idea of framing climate anxiety as a disorder and instead positions it as a politically charged emotion.

### 4.4 Divergent Forms of Mobilization

The interviews showed a clear difference in the types of activism pursued by young men and women. Male activists often discussed formal political processes—lobbying, petitioning, and working with

political parties—while female activists tended to engage in grassroots, community-based forms of activism. Sophia (21) described her activism as focusing on "creating safe spaces for people to talk about their fears, organizing local workshops on sustainable living, and building community gardens." This type of activism is relational and requires significant emotional labor. Conversely, Mark (24) described his activism: "I focus on the numbers. I'm good at data analysis and policy research. My role is to get the numbers right and take them to the people in power. That's how we make real change." This finding suggests that the way climate anxiety differs by gender leads to a division of labor within the movement. Women often handle the essential but undervalued emotional and community-building work, while men are more likely to occupy traditional, powerful, and often male-dominated political spaces.

## 5. Discussion and Recommendations

This study provides strong evidence that climate anxiety is shaped by society and influenced by gender roles, expectations, and media usage. The emotional impact of climate change, which affects young women more than others, is not just a state of distress. It can drive mobilization. The findings support existing theories on gender and emotional work, showing how the traditional "caretaker" role extends to the global environmental crisis. This emotional burden, while difficult, motivates young women to engage in specific types of activism—those that focus on community, empathy, and building relationships. This research highlights an important dynamic within the climate movement: a clear division of labor based on gender. The emotional and community-building tasks carried out mainly by young women form the basis for more formal political actions. Without the emotional work of processing climate grief and creating resilient communities, the larger climate movement would lack its social and emotional strength. However, this effort is often undervalued and can lead to burnout among the young women who carry it. The findings of this study urge a revaluation of what effective climate activism looks like. While formal political action is important, the relational and emotional work involved in grassroots organizing is equally, if not more, crucial for lasting social change. To create a more sustainable and fair movement, we need to recognize and share the emotional burden and labor that currently falls on young women. Based on these findings, we present the following recommendations for different stakeholders:

### 5.1 For Policymakers and NGOs –

**Fund Grassroots Organizing:** Allocate more funding and resources to grassroots, community-focused climate initiatives. These areas rely heavily on young women's efforts and effectiveness, but they often receive less support compared to traditional lobbying and policy groups.

**Acknowledge Emotional Labor:** Recognize the emotional impact of climate activism in policy briefs and funding requests. This can validate the experiences of young activists and support the need for dedicated mental health resources.

### 5.2 For Mental Health Professionals

**Integrate Social Context:** Mental health professionals should incorporate a sociological understanding of gender and emotional work when dealing with climate anxiety. Counselling should consider the social pressures contributing to distress, rather than just focusing on individual coping strategies.

**Validate Activism as a Healthy Response:** Position climate activism as a healthy, empowering reaction to genuine threats, rather than a symptom of anxiety. This can help reduce feelings of hopelessness and support young people's political engagement.

### 5.3 For the Climate Movement

**Promote Equitable Emotional Labor:** Within activist groups, leaders should encourage a fair distribution of emotional work. Male activists should be trained to take on more emotional and community-focused roles so that care for the movement and the planet is shared more evenly.

**Celebrate All Forms of Activism**: Recognize and appreciate the importance of all types of activism, from policy initiatives to community organizing. This can help challenge the idea that formal political actions are more valuable than grassroots efforts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that climate anxiety is a deeply gendered phenomenon, shaped by societal expectations and emotional labor. The findings reveal that young women, burdened by a socialized role of caregiving, experience climate distress in a way that is both profound and politically transformative. Their anxiety, rather than being a source of paralysis, fuels a distinct form of relational, grassroots activism that is vital to the health and sustainability of the climate movement. By recognizing the gendered nature of climate emotion and validating the essential role of emotional labor, we can work towards a more inclusive, empathetic, and ultimately, more effective climate movement capable of meeting the monumental challenges of our time.

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