

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY



EMPOWERING FEMALE CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVISTS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Path Toward Environmental Social Justice

PEGGY ANN SPITZER

 OPEN ACCESS
BOOK

Empowering Female Climate Change Activists in the Global South

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

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Empowering Female Climate Change Activists in the Global South: The Path Toward Environmental Social Justice

BY

PEGGY ANN SPITZER

State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to Steven I. Levine
teacher, mentor, and friend for life*

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About the Author

Peggy Ann Spitzer is a Research Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and master's and doctoral degrees from American University in Washington, DC – all in International Relations. She studies women's leadership in global climate change adaptation through environmental and gender equity strategies and oral histories.

Between 2017 and 2021, she co-authored four articles and four book chapters (two of which won awards) on the social and cultural aspects of climate change; and one case study on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, she developed two digital oral history projects, one on women in US–Asian relations and the other on the implementation of a women-led irrigation technology in India. Prior to her work in climate change, she wrote a series of short biographies on women leaders in local communities; and served as a Program Consultant, with a specialty in Asian and Asian American studies, in Washington, DC for the Kluge Center for International Scholars (Library of Congress), Freer and Sackler Gallery (Smithsonian), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the East-West Center.

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Acknowledgments

It is an understatement to say that this book would not have been possible without the support of many – climate change/feminist activists, college and university students, colleagues, and friends. Initially, in thinking about the type of book I wanted to write – one that would appeal to undergraduate and graduate students and their professors, as well as researchers and social activists – I talked with Sue (Ruth) Bottigheimer, who urged me to formulate key questions into chapters. In addition, with Elizabeth Monroe-Cook, I discussed the psychology of female empowerment. As a Humanities Institute fellow at Stony Brook University, I worked with Adrienne Unger and Susan Scheckel, and two other fellows in my cohort – Shirley Jennifer Lim and Kristina Lucenko – with whom I shared many dinners and conversations about the women pioneers we were all researching. To get over the hump of writing and gain fresh perspectives, Karina Yager, an environmental anthropologist, provided important feedback. And, to help me streamline the hordes of terms, acronyms, and names of international organizations – I am thankful to Mary Diaz.

I could not have followed this path without conducting field interviews in Gujarat, India in 2019. I am thankful to Trupti Jain and Biplab Paul who invited me and my colleague, Jamie Sommer, to interview the farmers, who generously shared their stories with us. Trupti and Biplab arranged for Hetshree Kangad and Dhruvi Thaker to serve as interpreters in the field work. Long before I considered writing this book, I had many opportunities to discuss this field experience; and it led to the creation of a digital collection through my university's library, thanks to the Digital Projects Librarian, Victoria Pilato, the then Acting Dean of Stony Brook University Libraries, Shafeek Fazal, and the Principal of *Schema Design*, Christian Marc Schmidt.

All would not have been possible without support from the Faculty in the Arts, Humanities and lettered Social Sciences (FAHSS) Fund; and the careful attention and enthusiasm of those at Emerald Press. Once I decided to write this book, Jamie continued to encourage me; and Trupti and Biplab helped me obtain a deeper, empathetic understanding about the lives of rural women in the developing world. They are my extended family.

My first encounters with female climate change entrepreneurs came from the *Women for Results* awards program through the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC). In 2016, Jamie, Aidée Saucedá Davila, and I interviewed some of the early awardees. Later and up until 2022, I worked with several students at Stony Brook University to research and conduct oral history

interviews with several *Gender Just Climate Solutions* (GJCS) award winners (also through the UNFCCC). All are named, and their projects discussed, in this book. It was gratifying to witness students from my home institution of Stony Brook University— Erin Byers, Kunika Chahal, Jasmeet Kaur, Leio Koga, Martha Maria Chavez Megrete, and Yasmeen Watad – learn from the entrepreneurs and decide upon their own career paths.

Over the past two years, I served as a judge for the GJCS awards program and was inspired by many of my colleagues. In the Woman and Gender Constituency, I learned from many, particularly Anne Barre, Patricia Bohland, Bridget Burns, and Hwei Amy Lim, Gina Cortés Valderrama, and other “fierce feminists” who patiently helped me understand the trajectory of international climate change negotiations.

The world remains very unsure about how to deal with climate change and female empowerment. Because of this, I am thankful for the encouragement of Susan Hinely, a great scholar and teacher of global women’s history, and Steven I. Levine, my lifelong friend and mentor to whom this book is dedicated. He and his partner, Madeline Levine, helped me navigate many peaks of sureness and valleys of uncertainty. I could not have accomplished this without them and the support of my husband, Jay Raphaelson, my daughters, Emily Christoff and Caroline Christoff, and our long-time family friend, Anna McCreight.

For Christmas 2021, Caroline sent me a postcard with the following quote from Greta Thunberg: “Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is.” In fact, ongoing intergenerational actions are crucial, and I am thankful for all who recognize that the fire still is burning.

Endorsements

Inspiring citizens to act to solve the global climate crisis in every aspect of their lives certainly is one of the most crucial missions of humanity today. Dr. Peg Spitzer's wonderful book *Empowering Female Climate Change Activists in the Global South: The Path Toward Environmental Social Justice*, provides such a galvanizing inspiration, with a wide variety of diverse and stunning true stories. But most importantly, this book reveals the untapped potential of tackling structural gender norms and empowering women to speak up for their rights, to create and to implement relevant and just climate solutions that serve people and the planet. As a university professor, mentor and jury member of the Gender Just Climate Solutions Awards, granted each year during the climate COPs, Dr. Peg Spitzer has had the opportunity to collect numerous oral stories of impressive female and feminist grassroots climate activists from all regions of the world. She offers these life jewels to the reader in a fascinating literary piece.

Anne Barre, Gender & Climate Policy Coordinator,
Women Engage for a Common Future

It is well known that women are uniquely and disproportionately impacted by climate change in the Global South. Alarming, many scholars ignore what these women have to say about their lived experiences and the solutions that follow from them. In *Empowering Female Climate Change Activists in the Global South: The Path Toward Environmental Social Justice*, Dr. Peg Spitzer draws on oral history interviews to give a voice to women affected by climate change and, in the process, describes solutions that not only empower women but also improve the environment. This book is a must read. It leaves the reader with a sense of hope that if women, who find themselves in difficult circumstances across the planet, can leave the world better off for all of us than we surely can do the same.

John M. Shandra, Professor of Sociology,
State University of New York at Stony Brook

Professor Spitzer is committed to expanding access to scholarship on historically underrepresented communities. Her work offers a critical look at the effects of climate change on rural populations around the world. Through oral histories, field studies, and interviews, she examines the effects of patriarchal social structures and cultural practices on rural women's ability to pursue social justice related to climate change and the environment in Africa, Central America, and South/Southeast Asia.

Dana Haugh, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library,
Yale University

Dr. Spitzer is answering the question of our time: how do we address climate change while building a more equitable, diverse, and beautiful society? This book tells the stories of the women who are leading the charge to protect and regenerate their environment, their communities, and the women and girls around them. Dr. Spitzer shares with us the struggles, desires, and successes of those who have been without a voice in their words. We need these stories. Dr. Spitzer reminds us why justice matters for climate solutions. She helps us to see past technocratic solutions to climate change to the heart and soul of our path forward, place-based solutions through stories, community, and the women who hold the world together. This book is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the power of narratives, the power of women, and the power of hope in the face of adversity. This book connects us to each other and to women all around the world transforming their communities and each other. Dr. Spitzer introduces us to solutions that put justice, equity, and survival right in the center of how we talk about our changing climate. Dr. Spitzer writes with kindness, beauty, and heart that draws you in and introduces you to women in India, Guatemala, Tunisia, Colombia, Uganda, Vietnam, and more like they were old friends. You will laugh, you will cry, you will get angry at injustice, but mostly you will be empowered, and you will gain the insight that empathy is one of the strongest tools we have for creating a more just, more vibrant, and more sustainable future.

Andrew Hargrove, PhD,
University of South Florida

Dr. Spitzer's book serves as an inspirational handbook guide to empowering woman from the Global South. She combines oral histories with scholarly research and provides deep insights into the challenges and opportunities that rural women from the Global South face with climate change and power dynamics. Spitzer gives voice to underrepresented women in the discussion and navigation of finding translational knowledge and employing new perspectives on gender theory. Her book provides an insightful and thorough examination of the necessary policies that must include women in the decision-making and carry through of climate action initiatives and pathways for sustainable empowerment of rural communities. Dr. Spitzer's book incorporates inspirational stories of women and the ways in which they have bridged the rural and transnational networks to create innovative and empowering opportunities to tackle climate change at the local level. Weaving women's oral histories, scholarly research on gender and power, and an examination of international institutions, Spitzer provides numerous insightful and uplifting reflections on justful and woman empowering movements across the Global South. Any researchers of climate change and practitioners working on the forefront of climate change adaptation planning, and especially relevant to women, will find enlightening and beneficial information in this book on how to realize climate actions that benefit rural to global society.

Karina Yager, School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences
and Sustainability Studies,
State University of New York at Stony Brook