

MOTHER NATURE: GENDER'S IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL  
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS

by

Lucille G Lynch

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
graduation in the Honors College  
May 2021

Thesis Supervisor:

Nicole Taylor

**COPYRIGHT**

by

Lucille Lynch

May 2021

## **FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT**

### **Fair Use**

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

### **Duplication Permission**

As the copyright holder of this work I, Lucille Lynch, authorize duplication of this work, in whole or in part, for educational or scholarly purposes only.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my family for encouraging my academic endeavors. I also thank the Texas State Honors College for their continuous support and opportunities. Lastly, a special thanks to Dr. Nicole Taylor for supervising this thesis, as well as providing motivation throughout the process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. METHODOLOGY .....	6
III. FINDINGS .....	7
IV. CONCLUSION .....	13
APPENDIX I .....	14
REFERENCES .....	15

## **Abstract**

This research studies the relationship between gender and the individual's perceptions of environmentally conscious actions. This study examines whether specific gender identities are more likely to partake in environmentally conscious actions and if individuals see any patterns in their life regarding environmentalism and gender. Methods consist of in-depth, one-time individual interviews with college students to understand possible links between gender and environmental consciousness from the perspective of students. Findings align with previous, broader research on gender's impact on environmentalism; most students remarked that their female identifying friends made more environmentally conscious daily actions than other gender identities, and the majority see a link between femininity and environmentalism. These findings support previous research and could lead to the investigation of why this pattern exists, and what impact it may have on larger issues such as climate change legislation and environmental movement.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Historical Context:**

Climate change is an ever-growing topic of debate among policy makers and young generations. The evidence and predictions of future climate impacts are frightening and to some, literally unbelievable. Society, media, and people in power have emphasized individual actions such as recycling, owning reusable water bottles and metal straws, eating less meat, and bringing reusable bags to grocery stores. Environmental concerns are portrayed as gender neutral by politicians and scientists, implying that the individual responsibilities are gender neutral. However, historical evidence and modern studies imply that may not be the case. Peoples' gender perceptions influence their individual environmental actions and their perceptions of other's environmentally conscious actions. (MacGregor 2010)

Gender stereotypes and their implications are widely studied in cultural, political, economic, and societal contexts. However, gender is not widely studied in scientific topics; science is seemingly neutral and nongendered. Nonetheless, individual's perceptions of stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics can have real impacts on their views of individual environmental actions.

One reason that gender is an important aspect of environmental consciousness is the history of women and men's roles in the emergence of environmental policies. As MacGregor writes in "Gender and Climate Change: From Impacts to Discourses" (2010), women were the leaders of the environmental movement in the 1980's and 1990's during the emphasis of biodiversity, health, and anti-military environmental concerns. After the concerns were brought into policies, women were less able to be a part of the

conversation. Men largely outnumber women in political positions and scientific positions of power. The introduction of climate issues into these landscapes erased the focus of previous environmental concerns and turned attention to environmental security (ES) and scientific efficiency (MacGregor 2010). Many people in power see environmental security and human security, things such as human rights and poverty, as different, unrelated issues; as MacGregor states, “human security reflects a stereotypically feminine set of concerns and that these are more ethically and socially relevant concerns than those that seem to capture the attention of people in power,” (MacGregor p232).

Another reason that gender should be linked to and studied with environmental actions is the idea of masculine stereotypes. There is a strong sense of what it means to be a man in society, and there are underlying reasons why this may include a lack of environmental consciousness. Some of these reasons may stem from what is known as the “masculinity crisis”. This term has been used in literature for the last few years, and it refers to the idea of men feeling power slippage, especially straight, white men, and their response to that feeling. In the article “The Many Possible Meanings of the ‘Masculinity Crisis’” (2018), Wong describes that the response of men usually results in doubling down of stereotypical masculine behaviors. Men feel “society’s stereotyped expectations that they should be more inhumane than humane, more violent than empathic,” (Wong, 2018). If societal norms for women include being caregivers, nurturing, and emphasizing social issues, then men would turn away from these feminine characteristics in order to seem masculine in a society, especially under the masculinity crisis that some are feeling.



Adding in the fact that many environmental actions are associated with femininity, this would cause men to turn away from environmentally conscious actions.

### **Larger Implications**

If we understand that men rely on maintaining masculine stereotypes to feel powerful, we can understand why the focus of environmental policies tend to reinforce masculine traits such as military and technological success. This also helps us understand why the original aspects of environmental concerns like social issues and environmental harm are left up to individual actions and thus, women. Macgregor explains:

“While the masculinist EM discourse focuses on the supply side, and technical solutions and ES focus on militaristic ‘muscle-flexing’ (Denton 2002, p. 18), there is a parallel feminizing discourse that places the onus on individuals as carers, consumers and provisioners to take responsibility for reducing the environmentally harmful impacts of contemporary life. Governments and environmentalists in the affluent world place emphasis on the role of individuals as consumers to tackle climate change by conserving energy, recycling waste, growing food and foregoing flights. Few recognize that insofar as most of these domestic activities they will largely be performed by women (MacGregor 2010)”.

Domestic societal norms are usually associated with femininity, which cause masculine stereotypes to avoid domestic activity. As Macgregor discussed, many environmental actions are in the domestic sphere, meaning men may find themselves avoiding these environmentally friendly tasks. Domestic environmentally friendly actions add yet another link of environmentalism to femininity. The societal pressure for men to uphold masculine stereotypes, along with the individual responsibility of environmental concern placed on environmentally empathetic, domestic activities leaves women to partake.

To reemphasize these points, a recent study was performed using impressions of climate change groups in relation to gender. Swim and Geiger reiterate that “pro

environmental behaviors are associated with feminine traits more than masculine traits” and relate this to traditionally female roles. They discuss that:

“Masculine traits often reflect agency...and agency is associated with competence (Fiske et al., 2002), people may be more respectful of and perhaps support opinions expressed by groups perceived to have masculine traits. As another example, because men do not want to appear feminine and behave in ways to avoid these impressions... they may avoid being associated with opinion groups that are seen as feminine (Swim, Geiger 2018)”.

Feminine traits have negative connotation due to their lack of power in upholding masculine stereotypes that society desires. Eventually, people may even act against the views of feminine-associated, pro-environmental groups. Societal pressure to maintain masculinity can “create a desire to avoid interacting and identifying with a [pro environmental] group and engage in actions that oppose them... possibly to avoid stigma-by-association,” (Swim, Geiger 2018). This may mean choosing not to recycle, avoidance of educating oneself on environmental issues, or critiquing those who chose an eco-friendlier lifestyle. This shows how important it is to realize the link between beliefs, actions, science, and gender norms. If there is more research conducted in this area, there may be increased and improved efforts to destigmatize environmental actions in the public.

### **Present Study**

Although previous research covers the broad scope of environmentalism and gender’s relationship, I wanted to see it through the perspective of individual college students’ actions. By interviewing individuals, we can see if the societal norms between masculinity, femininity, and environmentalism impact individual actions today. This study aims to look at an individual’s recycling habits, thoughts on reusable products, and overall environmentally conscious perspectives. The study also examines their

assumptions and perceptions of people who chose to be or not to be environmentally conscious. By interpreting the individual perceptions and actions, I aim to connect my findings to broader research on environmentalism and gender. This study adds to the current literature by providing individualistic opinions on gender and environmental consciousness from individuals of different genders; this adds support to previous claims of gender and environmentalism links.

My study examines the influence of gender identity on environmentally conscious actions. My research questions include: Are there gender differences in individual actions for the environment? Do participants associate environmental action with feminine or masculine characteristics? What gendered patterns do participants see in regard to environmental actions?

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

My method of collecting primary data was to conduct individual, one-time interviews with college students. I obtained IRB approval for this study on Monday, March 15, 2021. I began recruiting the next week. I began recruiting the next week through classroom presentations at the university. I recruited at a few of my supervisor's classes, as well as some of my own classes. The participants were not compensated for their time, and it was based solely on voluntary participation. The interviews were conducted over zoom and were approximately thirty to forty-five minutes each. I obtained verbal informed consent from each participant and audio recorded the interviews. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix.

I chose to interview students between ages 18-24 at Texas State to limit age variables in my research. I sought out gender diversity for my interviewees in order to get a wide scope of insight on gender's link to environmentalism. Out of my six participants total, two identified as female, one participant was nonbinary, and three identified as male. Names throughout this study have been changed to protect confidentiality of participants.

### III. FINDINGS

#### Female Friends take Lead

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned that their female identifying friends were the ones who were more involved in environmentally conscious choices. This was especially true in two categories, eating habits and knowledge.

Veganism and vegetarianism are known as an ecofriendly diet that is growing in popularity. Lee, a nonbinary student, mentioned that with “recycling items I don’t really notice a gender difference. When it comes to eating, I do notice a difference. There’s kind of this weird thing around people who identify as guys, like cis guys, wanting to eat meat and feeling like grilling a steak is just very manly.” Julia, a female student, noticed the same phenomenon in her friend group. She stated that as she was transitioning to veganism, “it was often men making fun of me for it ... I don’t think I was ever called girly for doing it, but I think there was definitely misogyny in some of the arguments.” Between many of my participants, this pattern of gender and eating habits came up frequently, especially the association of men to meat. Some participants hypothesized that the hypermasculine men in their lives have strong associations of meat to muscle, and society pushes men to fit the muscular body standards. Other participants mentioned that it may be due to a societal aversion to things labeled as “feminine.” Eating habits and diet culture, plus caring for the environment, have all been deemed as feminine by society and therefore may cause masculine people to be closed off to veganism and vegetarianism.

Not only were ecofriendly diets more common with the participants’ female friends, but so was awareness on environmental issues. Lee notices this in their friend

group and in public saying, “ I think that I have noticed more feminine identifying individuals probably within my age group, under the age of twenty-five, being more knowledgeable about their impact on the environment than men or male identifying individuals.” To account for this pattern, some of my participants notice more awareness about general social issues in minority groups. Henry, a male student, explained that it “just goes back to having friends that hold you accountable, and a lot of that I feel like comes from women, people in some sort of minority that are usually the most vocal voices behind the issues.” Maybe the increased environmental awareness of female friends about environmental issues is why they are more likely to make environmentally conscious decisions in the participants’ social groups. Some of this awareness and knowledge is seen in social media as well. Many participants brought up that their female friends are most likely to be posting environmental posts on their social media feeds.

While interviewing college students, the topic of major was brought up regarding education on environmental impacts. Although there are many individuals of different genders across all majors, Lee mentions that “I think that I would be less surprised if a woman or someone who was feminine identifying was really knowledgeable about their environmental impact, whereas if I knew a man or a male identifying person under the age of 25 who had a lot of knowledge about the environment, I would probably assume that they were studying some kind of earth science or environmental science.” This was common across some of my participants; they feel as though women across all majors tend to be aware of environmental impacts whereas men tend to be more aware when they are in earth science majors as opposed to other majors. This link between

environmental awareness and gender may still stem from the societal masculine aversion to feminine associated acts and traits which caring for the environment may fall under.

### **Environmentalism linked to Femininity**

This leads to the larger discussion of environmentalism and femininity. Majority of participants discussed this pattern in terms of gender norms in society, media, and their own perceptions and biases. When asked about environmentalism aspects that are feminine or masculine, many participants described that there is a notable difference between how the genders are associated with the environment. Many explained that femininity in environmentalism is perceived as nurturing and caring for the earth. This is seen in acts like plant-based diets and purchasing reusable products. Some brought up the stereotypical relationship of women to the earth through visuals in the media; Henry points out a few of these like “floral crowns, wandering through the woods, making grass baskets or something.” The consensus among my interviewees was that there is an association of being environmentally conscious with femininity. I think this closely relates to historical backgrounds of these movements and larger societal gender norms for women.

There was also the mention of ecofriendly products and femininity. As a female identifying student named Alexis points out, “in general from what I’ve heard from some of my guy friends, it’s not manly to bring a reusable napkin or to buy sustainably.” These sustainable products may be presented as part of the domestic sphere, for example grocery shopping or kitchen supplies. As mentioned earlier, there is a masculine aversion to domestic actions due to their link to femininity (MacGregor 2010); this means that these ecofriendly products or sustainable purchases may be avoided. Stereotypical

domestic actions were mentioned again with an earth science student named Cole. He explained that although camping and “roughing it” in nature are typical masculine depictions, the act of caring and cleaning the environment fall under the feminine stereotypical characteristics. Cole was the only participant to mention the link of cleaning the earth and actual cleaning; this brings in the link of environmental actions to the domestic sphere and femininity once again.

### **Masculinity’s Relationship to Ecofriendly Actions**

When asked about masculine traits in environmentalism, themes of domination over nature are discussed. Henry describes “when there is a man portrayed with nature, typically with movies and stuff like that, there’s always killing involved somehow, there’s always like ‘oh we’re going out to hunt’ ... it’s us in the elements. It’s very gritty and almost a destructive aspect of it. Maybe subconsciously that has gone to a point where men think that the only way to be associated with nature is to be destructive in some form.” I think Henry brings up a valuable point of societal gender norms in media impacting our perceptions. I think this can most definitely occur with our perceptions of environmentalism, as my participants have described. Looking again at veganism, we can see how the masculine stereotype of eating meat or drinking milk to “bulk up” have created this idea that to be masculine, you need to consume meat. Not only have these gender norms impacted their actions, but it also impacted their perceptions of other’s actions, such as the masculine men who criticized Julia for being vegan.

My participants also had preconceived perceptions of people who chose to be against environmental action. When asked how they visualize people who go against ecofriendly actions, almost all my participants answered immediately with a very clear



visual: an older, wealthy, white male. Lee goes into this even further by trying to explain the reasoning for this answer; “And in my mind at least, that correlation to like an older wealthier white male really just comes from the super capitalist idea of this guy who prioritizes his time, has made a lot of money because he’s prioritized his time well, and continues to do so in a fashion that earns him more money; and going out of his way to recycling it’s- to him- is just an inconvenience and he can’t profit.” The word businessman was in many of these answers. Analyzing this bias brings in many larger conversations of capitalism and American policies on environmental legislation. I believe it can all be linked to the aversion to feminine attributes. With a majority male government, if the politicians have this aversion, and environmentalism is linked to softer, feminine characteristics, then legislation will not favor these issues. A few participants got into this large-scale discussion as well. Henry touches on this topic, explaining that someone opposed to environmentally conscious action would usually “be some sort of businessman, an older white man in his forty or fifties. I think it’s very much someone who has something to protect, whether it’s their ego or their company.”

The aversion to feminine traits is not limited to men strictly critiquing women like in Julia’s case. For instance, another male participant named Clayton is in an earth science major. He describes that being around his male friends can lead to being called out when he discusses environmental issues. He recalled being teased as a “tree-hugger” for cleaning litter by his masculine male friends. Julia also makes the point of women who may choose not to participate in ecofriendly actions, “even the women who have internalized misogyny in my life are more likely to eat meat or drive everywhere.”

## **Discussion**

These findings do not mean to generalize all genders by these observations; however, they are patterns that the interviewees see in their lives. The majority of my participants were vegan and very conscious of their environmental footprint, but I hypothesize that this is because people who participate in those actions are more likely to be interested in an environmentally focused study. Future studies may recruit in a way that aims to interview people who are not particularly environmentally conscious in order to have a broader range of students.

By examining the personal experiences of college students, we have observed the major connections seen throughout their experiences. These connections show importance of acknowledging gender in connection with seemingly genderless topics, such as the environment. It can give us more insight into why we may have certain perceptions of these issues.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The study's findings largely support the hypotheses created previously. The majority of the participants explained their female friends are more likely to be environmentally conscious, and that they see links between femininity and environmentalism. The study also found some perceptions of masculinity as averse to environmentalism.

These results help support previous research on environmentalism and femininity. They also give more personal insight into college-aged individuals' experiences with gender's effects on environmentally conscious actions by others, as well as perceptions of these actions.

The connections studied between gender and environmental consciousness are growing in importance as environmental issues become a growing concern on the global stage. By using this kind of data, ecofriendly brands, organizations, and policies can be altered to become more appealing to a broader range of individuals.

## APPENDIX I.

### Semi Structured Interview Protocol

- 1) Which best describes you? Identifies as female, identify as male, identify as gender nonconforming, Different Identity.
- 2) Describe your relationship with the natural environment—how do you feel about environmentalism?
- 3) What does environmental consciousness mean to you?
- 4) Describe your environmentally conscious daily actions? What kinds of things do they entail?
- 5) Explain any conscious shopping or eating habits that you may do to be more environmentally friendly? (i.e., veganism, thrifting, consuming less, etc.).
- 6) Have you noticed a specific gender identity in your friend group that chooses to participate in ecofriendly actions? Do you notice any gender group of your friends that chose to not participate in ecofriendly actions?
- 7) Are there any examples of activities that you or your friends do not participate in because they are not convenient (i.e. recycling in buildings, reusable bags)? Are there any that you do partake in despite the inconvenience?
- 8) What sorts of personality traits do you assign to people that partake in ecofriendly actions? What about people who chose not to? Why?
- 9) How would you physically describe someone who is environmentally conscious?
- 10) If you can, explain the last time you and your friends discussed the environment, and in what context. What did you discuss?
- 11) In your experience, have you noticed a specific gender more concerned about environmental issues?
- 12) In your experience, do you feel like a specific gender is more involved in day-to-day environmentally conscious choices?
- 13) Are certain aspects of environmentalism associated with masculinity or femininity?
- 14) In your opinion, do different genders do environmentalism differently?
- 15) In your opinion, do you think gender plays a role in what people do or don't do for the environment in their daily lives? Why?
- 16) Are there any final examples of your experiences with gender and environmentalism, either yourself, a friend, or an observation in public?

## REFERENCES

Sherilyn MacGregor, “‘Gender and Climate Change’: From Impacts to Discourses’,

*Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 6, no. 2 (2010): 223–38.

Swim, J. K., & Geiger, N. (2018). The gendered nature of stereotypes about climate change opinion groups. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 21(3), 438–456. Business Source Ultimate.

Wong, Alia. "The Many Possible Meanings of the ‘Masculinity Crisis’." June 2018, Web.