

Equity in climate scholarship: a manifesto for action

[Climate and Development](#) editorial

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We – the Editors of *Climate and Development* – react in both delight and dismay to the ‘Hot List’ of 1000 influential scholars in climate change published by Reuters¹ on 20 April 2021. Delight because the compilation of such a list demonstrates the critical importance of climate change as a major global challenge, celebrating climate change knowledge-holders who are at the forefront of ground-breaking and influential thinking and research. As a climate change journal, we commend these scholars and their achievements.

Yet we are dismayed to see that only 122 of the people on the list are women, and only 111² on the list are based in institutions in countries of the Global South, of whom 88 are from China. Not a single one of these scholars is based at an African institution outside of South Africa, which itself only has four scholars on the list (all of them men). These facts are in stark contrast with our experience at *Climate and Development*, where we regularly receive and publish outstanding scholarship coming from authors in countries that are among the most vulnerable to, and impacted by, climate change, and have done so for over a decade (Schipper & Ensor, [2019](#); Klein, [2009](#)).

The Reuters ‘Hot List’ reflects several academic biases that interfere with our ability to undertake equitable and impactful research on climate and development challenges. To begin, social sciences and humanities scholars are underrepresented on the list. There are some real reasons for this. Publishing traditions and rates tend to favour natural sciences in such metrics, where there is a tendency to publish more in indexed scientific journals, while some disciplines in the social sciences and humanities favour single-author research articles or books over multiple co-authored papers, naturally reducing the publication rate. In addition, natural sciences receive 770% more research funding on climate change than social sciences (Overland & Sovacool, [2020](#)), which generates large differences in the sort of publications being produced. Related to this, gender biases in funding are significantly more explicit in the physical sciences than in social sciences (Boyle et al., [2015](#)) and there are more men in STEM subjects than women. Despite there being more women in academia than 60 years ago, gender differences have increased in terms of both productivity and impact (Huang et al., [2020](#)).

However, the most spectacular feature of the ‘Hot List’ lies in the percentage of authors based in institutions in the Global South. If telling us anything at all, the ranking reveals the unequal research conditions in the Global South. Scholars in the Global North benefit from significant advantages in terms of resourcing: financial, intellectual and administrative support to develop grant applications; access to sources of funding to undertake research; and the availability of research infrastructure including libraries and journal subscriptions. Scholars in the Global South have more restricted access to journals, libraries and online resources, and while they may be able to publish a paper for free, they might not even be able to download and read other papers published in the same issue of a journal. In illustration, only a few African university

libraries have reliable internet connectivity, with South African universities being among the most equipped in the continent.

Additional barriers relate to the persistence of inequitable partnerships and colonial models of scientific practice, where researchers from the Global North often claim senior authorship rights, and researchers from the Global South are relegated to the status of local researcher assistants and data collectors. This is increasingly recognised (Gillespie, [2021](#); Subramanian & Kapur, [2021](#)) and can also constrain the ideas and insights that are acknowledged as legitimate (Comaroff and Comaroff [2012](#); Ensor et al., [2021](#); Walsh-Dilley and Wolford [2015](#)). Such inequalities are increasingly being called out in climate change research (Abimola et al., [2021](#)).

Together, these factors add to the long-standing inequities in the quality of education provision between the Global North and the Global South. These interrelated issues reduce the visibility and therefore the citation rates of scholars in the South. Researchers from the Global South and Global North are competing with unequal weapons and this needs to be acknowledged.

Finally, while we could spend time critiquing the methodology for creating the 'Hot List', instead we simply reflect that the common use of academic metrics of production, citation, and reproduction does not necessarily tell the full story of the impact and influence of research itself (Ravenscroft et al., [2017](#)) and recall the debates around their use (Fire & Guestrin, [2019](#)). Unless these lists use metrics that take into account the realities of power, privilege and how 'merit' is constructed, we and many like us will continue to question their appropriateness.

The harsh realities of the male-dominated and North-centred composition of this particular 'Hot List' prompt us as an editorial group to respond with a call to action: a set of pressing action points to be taken up by scholars, journal editors and publishers to confront this demonstrable and significant inequity in academia through systemic changes in the way we publish and cite academic contributions. While we acknowledge that these points are relatively minor in comparison with the vast and systemic issues that need to be addressed, they can still have significant impact in closing the inequality gap in climate scholarship.

What can scholars do?

- (1) *Actively cite scholars from the Global South.* There is growing pressure for awareness on the importance of decolonizing scholarship. This means a number of things, from considering who you are and where you do fieldwork, to how you value the contribution of field assistants (e.g. Wight, [2021](#)). But it also means considering whose knowledge your work draws on. While more studies on climate change in the Global South are being published now than a decade ago (Vincent & Cundill, [2021](#)), this work is not necessarily being written by scholars from the Global South. Furthermore, these scholars are not getting the same attention as scholars from the Global North. Decolonizing scholarship also includes actively citing papers from regional and non-Western journals, and not just work published in journals with high impact factors.
- (2) *Actively cite female scholars.* Like scholars from the Global South, women's work is also less cited (Dion et al., [2018](#)). There are reasons why women's scholarship may not be considered as influential – they often take the main responsibility for childcare, leaving less time for writing and travelling to (or attending online) conferences. Women are less successful in receiving research funding than men (Zhou et al., [2018](#)) and their research careers are often marked by zig-zag trajectories (Gersick & Kram, [2002](#)) and other unevenness that creates biases (Bosanquet, [2017](#)). Citing biases creep in through what is known as the 'Matthew effect', where men's research is viewed as most central and important in the field, and the 'Matilda effect', where women's research is viewed as less important and their ideas often attributed to male scholars (Dion et al., [2018](#)).

- (3) *Cite across disciplines.* Climate change is an interdisciplinary problem but frequently scholarship remains within its comfort zone, sustaining differences in citation rates while poorly reflecting the nature of climate change as a research challenge. We need to recognize the need for different disciplinary traditions to help us answer climate change challenges. Can a quantitative model of the impacts of climate change on gender say more than a qualitative analysis of how climate change affects men and women differently, for example? Recognizing and exploring the insights offered beyond our respective disciplinary comfort zones is a task for all scholars of climate change.
- (4) *Actively seek out co-authors from the Global South.* Global North scholars should use their privilege to include authors from the Global South as co-authors whenever possible, including through pursuing research collaborations and taking a step back, and allowing others the opportunity to lead on papers. The same applies to including female scholars and more junior researchers as co-authors. Even beyond academic papers and citation, scholars have a responsibility to collaborate with and open space for ideas and insights from researchers from the Global South whenever possible – particularly when studying issues of such direct significance to those living in the South.

What can editors do?

- (5) *Diversify the Editorial Board.* Journals use Editorial Boards in different ways. *Climate and Development* turn to our Board members as journal ambassadors and reviewers. That is why we have sought to ensure that we have scholars represented from around the globe. They need to represent our authors so that they can review and recommend other reviewers from the regions where the scholarship is being undertaken. This helps minimize reviewer bias, which happens even in double-blind reviewer processes like in *Climate and Development*, and also ensures accuracy (Woolston, [2021](#)). Some evidence indicates that having more female scholars on editorial boards leads to more female reviewers; if one benefit of reviewing is that it improves a reviewers' writing as well, this would benefit female authors (Fox et al., [2019](#)).
- (6) *Diversify reviewers.* Similar to the point above, reviewers need to come from the regions where the work is being done. A study examining gender dimensions in Ghana, for instance, should be reviewed by a Ghanaian scholar, who understands the socio-cultural context of the research. The concern about not giving sufficient value to work coming from the Global South should be taken seriously. Whether implicit or explicit, reviewers' bias can play a significant role in gatekeeping whose knowledge counts.
- (7) *Encourage submissions from Global South authors.* Not all journals think that they need to be engaged in equity and justice debates or that these relate to them. Yet every time a decision is made to publish something, this very process gives value to that knowledge. The same applies to indigenous knowledge: we need to take a stance to ensure that what counts as 'real' knowledge is not just relegated to 'scientific' knowledge. Editors could even go beyond this and commission papers from Global South authors. They can also provide guidance to new scholars from the South in early stages of the submission process – to assist them in avoiding common pitfalls and improving their chances at successful reviews.
- (8) *Expedite reviews where necessary for authors from under-represented backgrounds.* While the pandemic has put reviewing on a slower track across the globe, studies have shown that men have been able to publish more than women (Squazzoni et al., [2020](#)). During lockdown periods in different countries, it became apparent that certain groups were less able to publish during this time, and some journals expedited review for early career or female researchers. This process, while tricky for all involved, could help ensure greater balance in who is able to publish.

What can publishers do?

- (9) *Waive publishing fees for authors from the Global South.* While there is no publishing fee for *Climate and Development*, many top journals do require authors to pay article processing fees. This suggests that funding bodies, institutions or projects need to set aside money for authors to publish in these journals – often at costs that are unrealistic for scholars working in the South. While the advantage of this publishing model is its open access outputs, which benefit scholars in the Global South in terms of accessing publications, it prevents their own knowledge from being published.
- (10) *Make double-blind reviewing standard.* As already noted, reviewer bias or editorial bias is real. When publishers require double-blind reviewing as standard, it helps set everyone on a more level playing field, benefitting both women and scholars from the Global South. While some studies indicate that double-blind does not necessarily benefit female authors (Cox & Montgomerie, [2019](#)) or countries outside the US and UK (Kalavar et al., [2021](#)), this remains an open debate. Studies do show that single-blind reviewing benefits well-known authors from elite institutions (Tomkins et al., [2017](#)).
- (11) *Offer free journal access to institutions in the Global South.* The limited availability of library resources and journal subscriptions that confront scholars in the Global South has a visible impact on their work. As editors, we regularly see submitted manuscripts citing only older or freely available research. This reduces the perceived relevance of the submitted manuscript and therefore leads to more rejections. While there are some services available to expand access to journals, and a growing number of open access journals, many of the key climate change journals remain subscription only and therefore accessible only to those based at wealthy institutions.
- (12) *Provide support to Global South authors.* Many scholars from the Global South are not native English speakers and struggle to communicate in English, which further limits their abilities to publish in high-quality journals. Publishers could provide support through online trainings and complementary editorial support. *Climate and Development* have carried out a number of trainings with positive outcomes, and Editorial Board members may take time to mentor individual, early career authors to raise the quality of manuscripts on studies with significant potential to advance knowledge.

In summary, the ‘Hot List’ and similar attempts at ranking amplify voices that are privileged on account of several factors. The purpose of our Editorial is not to critique the list per se but to object to the way that such lists reinforce the systemic biases that exist in academia and therefore lead to such imbalances in the first place. We hope our recommendations are taken in a positive light and influence a more balanced view of valuing and enabling research and researchers globally. In 2021, it remains shocking that so few women are on this list, and even more so, that so few scholars from the Global South are included. We call on fellow scholars, journal editors and journal publishers to do better – we must defeat the inequity in academia in order to produce more usable and appropriate knowledge on climate change to help secure climate-resilient development for all. This requires drawing on knowledge produced by people across the globe and consequently, we need to make publishing a fairer process.

Notes

1 Retrieved April 22, 2021, from <https://www.reutersagency.com/media-center/reuters-launches-the-hot-list-ranking-of-top-climate-scientists-influencing-the-climate-change-debate/>

2 This number does not count four of the scholars based at international CGIAR centres in Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines who are not nationals of the countries in which they are based. We did not include scholars born in the Global South but working in the Global North in this number either.