

# WOMEN'S BODIES ARE A BATTLEFIELD

**Climate destruction, the refugee  
crisis and reproductive justice**



**Radical Women statement**  
by Debbie Brennan and Maudie Osborne

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by Debbie Brennan and Maudie Osborne,  
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Waves of humanity, with bundles on their backs, babies in their arms and toddlers by their sides, make perilous journeys to uncertain destinations and futures, not knowing if they will make it alive. This is the picture of a planet in turmoil.

In 2018, the 68.5 million people who left their homes behind were the largest displacement since the Second World War. By 2019, this grew to 70 million, with 26 million forced to leave not only their homes, but their countries. And the numbers keep rising. In 2018, the World Bank predicted that by 2050 Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia could produce 143 million climate refugees<sup>1</sup> in addition to those fleeing poverty, violence and persecution.

Approximately half of today's refugees are women and children. Women's reproductive and social roles place them at the vortex of the global mayhem. As mothers and grandmothers, workers and organisers, they are the mainstay of families and communities. Yet their second-class status makes them the subject of economic and political decisions by those in power, including interference by the church and state throughout their reproductive lives. It's women who absorb the shock of massive cuts to jobs and services, hold together communities suffering shortages of food, water and electricity, or facing armed attack.

Where sexist abuse is part of everyday life, crisis makes it worse. Rape is a weapon of war. And females, of any age, become victims of misogynists seeking scapegoats for their plights. A young woman explains why leaving was the only alternative to living in war-ravaged Somalia:

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<sup>1</sup> "Climate Change Could Force Over 140 Million to Migrate Within Countries by 2050," *World Bank Report*, 19 March 2018

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“We had to leave that place, because there was a lot of violence, fighting. I mean there was no peace and...no future there.”

In a world reeling from conflict and environmental destruction, it is important to understand how climate change, the refugee crisis and reproductive rights are interwoven — in order to see the solution.

Radical Women (RW) formed in a similarly tumultuous era, the 1960s, when mighty liberation movements of women, Blacks, Native Americans and LGBTIQ folks rebelled alongside anti-war protest in the U.S. and national independence struggles around the world. Then and now, reproductive justice — bodily sovereignty — has been a mostly unacknowledged factor in struggles against the global imperialist, patriarchal system called capitalism. But without the reproduction of labour and its social regimentation, profit cannot survive. By controlling our bodies, those in power control the lives of everyone.

Reproductive justice encompasses the right of women, lesbians and gays, trans and nonbinary people to autonomously decide about becoming parents; about when to have children and how to give birth; or if they will adopt. It spans everything parents need to raise children, from a clean environment to non-discriminatory employment with equal pay, from quality housing to free 24-hour childcare, education and healthcare.

RW believes reproductive justice is possible when working and oppressed people, led by those most subjugated, seize power, restore the environment and re-build society, based on equality and cooperation.

### **A planet in distress**

Across parts of Africa and Asia, droughts and floods, caused by global warming, have intensified revolt. Years of water shortages in Syria, for example, drove hundreds of thousands from agricultural lands to impoverished ghettos on urban fringes. These conditions helped accelerate the civil war that has displaced 13 million Syrians — the world’s largest refugee population. Seventy-five percent are women and children.

The Rohingya people of Myanmar have long endured persecution by the military regime, but conditions have been made even worse by climate change. In 2015, devastating floods and landslides forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from their homes. This triggered an escalation of genocidal violence by the government. Within two years, more than 740,000 fled the country, most to refugee camps in Bangladesh. The majority were women and children, nearly half under 12 years old.

Indigenous cultures across the Americas, South Pacific and Australia are also in danger. South Pacific islands like Tuvalu, the Solomons



*Maasai women carrying water in Kenya.*

and Kiribati, are sinking under rising seas. First Nations communities of Central Australia are living in unprecedented heat, as high as 68 degrees Celsius (154 F) in some places. For ancient peoples, relocation means disconnection from their traditional lands, which are deeply tied to cultures that evolved over many thousands of years.

From August 2019 to the present, Australia has been on fire — towns destroyed, communities displaced, toxic smoke poisoning the air of large regions and cities, and ecosystems imperilled.

Storm systems too — hurricanes, typhoons and tornadoes — are more ferocious and deadly. The incredible force of Hurricane Maria, which hit Puerto Rico in 2017, destroyed 200,000 homes, killed more than 3,000 people and displaced about 130,000. Before the island had even recovered, the January 2020 earthquake, the worst in a century, left more thousands of Boricuas homeless and struggling in the wake of serial disasters. In the same month, Indonesia, the world’s fourth most densely populated country, faced the worst flash flooding and landslides in years. By mid-January, 66 people were killed. The capitol, Jakarta, is sinking so fast that Indonesia has to relocate its seat of government.

Droughts, floods and pollution have contributed to a critical global shortage of clean water. Three out of 10, or 2.1 billion, people have no access to safe drinking water. For every 1,000 children born, 39 die before they reach five years old — mostly from preventable diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria. Drinking unclean water or using it in health clinics is causing infections that harm foetal development and lead to higher rates of maternal death.

### **Women shoulder the impact**

Destruction of infrastructure adds to women’s workload. Water has

to be hauled, usually from a distant source. Without electricity, clothes must be washed by hand. When crops can't grow, food is hard to get.

Escape to safety is dangerous. Over the winter of 2019/2020, 7 million children in tented refugee camps across parts of Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the U.S. Southwest suffered freezing temperatures. Save the Children reported conditions in Syria of "sub-zero temperatures, no roof over their heads and no warm clothes." By February, at least seven children, including a seven-month-old baby, died.

Deprivation is the daily reality for refugees, especially women and children. The experience of Syrian mother, Bara'a, living in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley camp, is one example. Prevented by mental exhaustion from breast-feeding her newborn, she had to rely on donated formula milk, and when this ran out, she resorted to sugar and water. Bara'a also had to take out loans for nappies for all three of her children, who wet themselves due to their mental trauma.



*Kurdish-Syrian refugees on the Turkish border.*

Child marriage – still practised where females and children are viewed as men's property – has increased significantly. Forced marriages may bring money into a hard-strapped family or reduce the number of mouths to feed. Unwed victims of sexual assault or rape may also be coerced into marriage to avoid "bringing shame" on the family. As of 2018, 36 percent of young Syrian girls in Jordan's refugee camps had been forced to marry.<sup>2</sup>

To gain protection, women often resort to "survival sex," trading sex with a guard or officer for safe passage. Unaccompanied children are also at risk. In the U.S., thousands of unaccompanied children were found to have been sexually abused while in government custody over the past four years.<sup>3</sup> Refugee women and girls are three-quarters of all human

<sup>2</sup> Daniele Selby, "Child Marriage of Syrian Refugees in Jordan Has More Than Doubled in 3 Years," *Global Citizen*, 18 April 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gonzales. "Sexual Assault of Detained Migrant Children Reported in

trafficking victims.

The chaos of a disaster upsets, even destroys, networks and supports that women, trans and queer people rely on for safety. When separated from their community, or alone gathering food or firewood, they are vulnerable – and without access to phones or transportation, they are especially so. In the Philippines, for example, more than 5,000 sexual assaults were reported by women within the month following Typhoon Haiyan. From New Orleans after Katrina to Fiji after Winston and Puerto Rico after Maria, reports of heightened assault are common.

LGBTIQ refugees face perpetual danger in refugee camps and host countries. Beatings and rape are a constant threat. Once in a new country, discrimination leaves a high proportion of LGBTIQ refugees homeless and jobless, and sex work may become their only means of survival. Many never reach a country to resettle and instead are left in a displacement limbo. Trans refugees face additional horrors, especially in detention, where they are commonly placed according to their gender at birth, denied drugs necessary to continue their transition and given no support.

Even reaching a destination country does not secure safety. Camila Díaz fled violence against trans people in El Salvador to seek asylum in the United States. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported her back to her home country, and within months she was murdered.

### **No refuge from the storm**

Women's roles as primary caregivers and providers of food and fuel put them directly in the path of danger. A 2004 Oxfam study of the tsunami that pummelled Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia found that male survivors outnumbered women three to one. The chief reason is that women lost critical evacuation time looking after children and other relatives.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services is the leading cause of death, disability and disease among displaced women and girls.<sup>4</sup> Yet services provided by UN and not-for-profit agencies have dropped sharply due to depleted funding even as the need rises. Services can't reach women in dire situations, such as Syrian victims of rape, partner violence and child marriage. Early-age pregnancy, urinary and reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases are just a few of the conditions that in-

the Thousands Since 2015," *NPR*, 26 February 2019

<sup>4</sup> "A Call to Protect Women and Girls on the Move," *UN Population Fund*, 5 October 2018

jure or kill if not treated.

The absence of contraception or safe, accessible abortion also leads to unwanted pregnancy that can be life-threatening in a crisis or where healthcare is unaffordable or denied to non-citizens. A Syrian refugee in South Beirut sought to abort her eighth pregnancy, but was denied an abortion because in Lebanon the procedure requires the husband's consent. Her husband had been incapacitated by a stroke. She survives, but is the caretaker for nine people. Conditions such as this account for up to 60% of preventable maternal deaths.

### Gendered immigration policies

In the global exodus are women walking hundreds of miles while heavily pregnant. Many miscarry on the road. Once they reach their destination country, they are detained and treated abusively by authorities. The cages along the U.S./Mexico border and the high-fenced detention compound at Australia's offshore detention centre at Nauru are testaments of this.

President Trump's list of countries whose people are banned from travel to the U.S. now includes Myanmar, Sudan, Eritrea and Nigeria – homelands of an ever-growing global refugee exodus. It is no coincidence that Trump also recently prohibited visas to pregnant women suspected of trying to enter the U.S. to get citizenship for their so-called "anchor babies."

Meanwhile, the government interferes with immigrant teens' right to terminate unwanted pregnancies, such as a 17-year-old refugee from South America, who in 2017 had been raped in her home country. The Office of Refugee Resettlement, responsible for the care of unaccompanied children, stepped in to prevent her abortion. She is now part of a class action of young immigrant women suing the government for depriving them of the "right to pregnancy-related care, including abortion, without interference."<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton also intervened to stop a refugee woman, who had been raped while at Nauru, from travelling to Australia for an abortion – even though his refusal put her at grave medical risk. Dutton accuses refugee women of claiming rape and seeking an abortion as a ploy to give birth in Australia in order to stay.

This cold inhumanity is also turned against pregnant refugees escap-

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Chen, "The Trump Administration Denies Abortions to Migrant Girls Using the Same Tactics as State Legislatures," *NBC News*, 21 June 2019

ing to Australia by boat. Their babies are categorised as "unauthorised maritime arrivals," ineligible for refugee status. These families are caught under a brutal regime of temporary, short-term visas with tough restrictions and negligible entitlements. They have no right to citizenship or permanent visa protection. The children can even be deported back to the country from which the parents fled. The toll this policy takes is unspeakable.

The injustice doesn't end there. The U.S., Australia and other countries have histories of forcibly sterilising people deemed undesirable by the powers-that-be – immigrant and refugee as well as Indigenous, disabled and poor.



Indigenous women from equatorial Brazil: "My body, my territory." "We defend the jungle and life."

### The problem is capitalism

Behind this unfolding horror is a global system with an insatiable hunger for profit. Its gluttony for resources and markets is the cause of endless wars. Most refugees come from the ground zero of U.S.-led conflicts: Syria, Afghanistan and Sudan. Other war zones across the planet – from Iraq to Yemen, Libya to Venezuela – have the fingerprints of Uncle Sam and his accomplices, including Australia, all over them.

In addition, capitalism's giant carbon *footprint* is all over the overheated planet. One hundred companies account for 70 percent of the world's consumption of fossil fuels, and the U.S. military is the single biggest consumer.

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a memorandum to Congress with this warning: "Climate change is an urgent and growing threat to our national security, contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources such as food and water. These impacts are already occurring, and the scope, scale and intensity of these impacts are projected to increase over time." But rather than working to address climate change, the U.S. war machine gears up to fight the unrest it causes.

Human life and nature, if they can't turn dollars, are treated like waste, and any opposition is seen as a threat to capitalism's security. As the key sustainers of their communities and natural environment, women bear the harshest blows. This inevitably puts them at the forefront of resistance.

### Crisis ignites protest

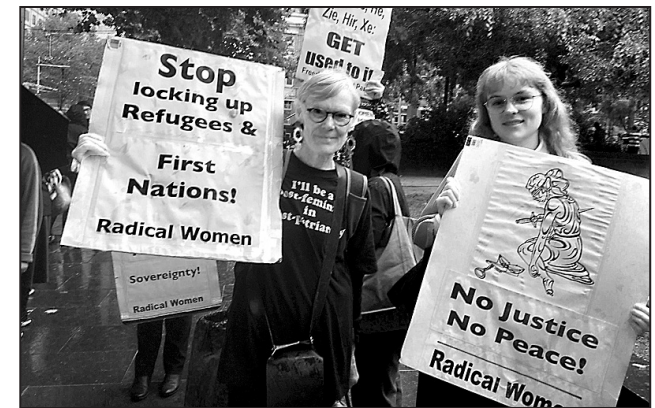
Throughout 2019, revolt spread across the world. And it's still moving, like a flame along a wick of dynamite. "El violador eres tú" (The rapist is you") is a global feminist anthem, naming the state — judges, police and presidents — as the violator.<sup>6</sup> From the U.S./Mexican border to Argentina and Chile, from the South Pacific to Sudan and India, women are standing up to the armed protectors of power and to the power itself. They stand on the shoulders of sister warriors before them. Rage against the barbarism of this system is heard in their demands for justice. Joining these struggles together into a global anti-capitalist revolt would quicken the flame.

Radical Women's demands include:

- Open the borders! Recognise environmental destruction, domestic violence, impoverishment and persecution in *any* form — as well as conflict and war — as legitimate grounds to flee. Immediate, full citizenship rights for all refugees. End forced marriages, homophobia and violence against trans and nonbinary people.
- End all military and corporate intervention around the world; make those responsible for these disasters pay for the cleanup and the safe relocation of people forced to evacuate, respecting their needs. Arm women for self-defence in conflict zones. Turn borders into points of welcome; disarm border personnel; abolish immigration enforcement agencies, such as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Australian Border Force. Nationalise industries most responsible for the carbon emissions, especially energy, and the technology that keeps them profitable; put them under workers' control.
- Reproductive justice for *all* women! Nationalise reproductive health and all healthcare, childcare, transportation, housing and service infrastructure under women's and workers' control. Guarantee

free pre- and post-natal care and support services for women who have children. Collectivise domestic responsibilities.

Feminists must bring these inseparable demands into the environmental, refugee and reproductive justice movements. Our united voices as sisters of colour, First Nations, refugees and immigrants, queer and trans folks and unionists can bring these movements together. With this multi-issue strength and leadership, we can triumph over forces that, right now, appear insurmountable.



Melbourne Radical Women at 2020 International Women's Day march.

At the heart of these demands is the solution: the profit system must be blown to smithereens through global revolution. Private property relations must perish. The leadership of women and other marginalised people will help ensure that there is no basis left for exploitation, bigotry or any other form of divisive control. Oppression will give way to equality and respect, and conflict will be supplanted by cooperation and solidarity. With democratic power in humanity's collective hands, a well-planned and coordinated economy will provide the needs of people and nature. It will restore humans' relationship with the natural world.

This is socialism. History shows such a society once existed. It can again, at a higher technological level. This is Radical Women's vision of a socialist feminist future.

Global resistance, which women are compelled to lead, will be planet-changing.

—February 2020

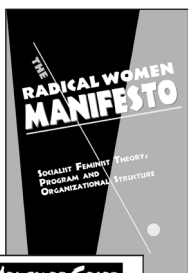
<sup>6</sup> Gaby Hinsliff, "The Rapist is You!": Why a Chilean Protest Chant is Being Sung Around the World," *The Guardian*, 4 February 2020

*Looking for a place where you  
can make a difference?*

## *Join Radical Women!*

RW is a trailblazing socialist feminist organisation. It's the revolutionary wing of the women's movement and a strong feminist voice within the Left. Immersed in the daily fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and labor exploitation, Radical Women views women's leadership as decisive to global change.

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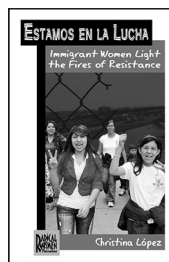


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