



## Changing business as usual in global climate and development action: Making space for social justice in carbon markets

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### ABSTRACT

Carbon markets are being promoted both by business and governments as a predominant way to address climate change. Critical scholarship on climate change has brought attention to their disappointing climate performance, for the social and geopolitical inequalities they engender and for distracting from the imperative of changing current extractivist modes of capitalist production and consumption. Yet, given that private interests are considered central in climate action today and that carbon markets are dominant, we argue that it makes it important for us as practitioners and academics to engage with them, while maintaining our own critical position. The central aim in this article is to grapple with the human dimensions of global environmental governance, to explore practical ways in which we may go about ensuring justice and sustainability in everyday development and climate action, beyond theoretical denunciations of the system and structures in which we find ourselves. Drawing on scholarship that questions the hegemonic power of capitalism, we adopt a practical stance to reflect on how a gendered methodology, the W+ standard, modelled on methods used to measure carbon emissions reductions, may be used in development and in combination with carbon standards if needed, in a way that emissions-reducing projects also lead to gender and social justice. The W+ Standard is a methodology that ensures that gendered inequalities, including women's often invisible care work, are accounted for, by quantifying and certifying benefits for women involved in community development and climate projects. Based on an activist academic and practitioner conversation, we explore if engaging in the politics of the present (in this case, with private interests and carbon markets) may make space for the political agency of women and men and diverse economic and social contexts in such projects and enable a shift in business as usual. We argue that there is a need to engage in new experimental economic relations in local contexts that may have the potential to change unequal development and environmental (climate) relationships, in encounters between global development and local lives.

### 1. Introduction

Greenhouse gas emissions must fall by 50 per cent in the next 10 years and reach 'net zero' by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Across the global economy, businesses, investors, policymakers and consumers have crucial roles to play. As the need to take action to reduce the carbon emissions because of business operations is becoming imperative, some are beginning to commit to strategies to achieve net zero or negative carbon emissions. A recent report shows that 30 % of the Fortune Global 500 have made

commitments to carbon neutrality, to purchasing 100 % renewable power or Science-Based Targets by 2030.<sup>2</sup> About 2,000 businesses have joined the Race to Zero campaign 'to rally leadership and support from businesses, regions, investors for a zero-carbon recovery that prevents future threats, creates decent jobs, and for inclusive, sustainable growth.'<sup>3</sup>

Many businesses have turned to carbon markets to offset their emissions. Carbon markets are arguably the highest-profile and the most common tool adopted by governments to regulate greenhouse gas

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<sup>1</sup> Paris Agreement, C.N.92.2016.TREATIES-XXVII.7.d (adopted on 12 December 2015, entered into force on 4 November 2016), art 2.

<sup>2</sup> Visualizing the Climate Targets of Fortune 500 Companies' *Visual Capitalist* (3 June 2021), <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/climate-targets-of-fortune-500-companies/> (accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup> UNFCCC, 'Race To Zero Campaign', <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/race-to-zero-campaign> (accessed 15 September 2021).

emissions and to mitigate climate change (Chung-En Liu & Cooper, 2020). Carbon markets enable buyers to purchase credits that support emissions-reducing projects, such as those that provide clean energy solutions or protect forests to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, as a means of contributing to a smaller global emissions footprint overall. Many such carbon markets work across the Global North and South and are used not only by companies, but also by individual consumers and governments.<sup>4</sup>

The technical focus of many emissions reductions programmes has led to increasing pressure to acknowledge the simultaneous need for sustainable human development, as defined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that this is not possible without social and gender justice.<sup>5</sup> Companies and investors are adopting approaches such as 'Gender Lens' and 'GenderSmart' Investing<sup>6</sup> that seek to integrate gender equality demands within climate financing to more easily respond to energy transition demands, increase profitability, and shift business models towards sustainability. A discourse on how gender equality makes smart business sense has characterized the past decades. The global financial crisis in 2008 led to a discussion on the role of the private sector in strengthening women's and girls' economic potential (Prügl and True, 2014; Chant & Sweetman, 2012). In what came to be called the 'business case for gender equality', a focus on gender equality and in particular the need for 'feminine care' and long-term thinking was seen as an antidote to the aggressive risk-taking masculinities that characterized the private sector (Griffin, 2013).

Both carbon markets and the business case for gender-equality have engendered critique. The lack of proper market regulation, the disappointing climate performance of markets, the social inequalities they reinforce and generate, and their vulnerability to being (mis)used by actors uninterested in climate mitigation (Bumpus and Liverman, 2011; Mol, 2012; Lohmann, 2011; Lohmann, 2009) have raised scepticism as to their use. Climate programmes reliant on carbon markets have exacerbated poverty and alienated poor people in the Global South from their resources and livelihoods (McAfee, 2012; Marino & Ribot, 2012). Global studies of climate programs such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD +) have criticized the lack of attention to gender in such interventions as well as the creation of new inequalities (Larson, Dokken, & Duchelle, 2015; Peach-Brown, 2011). Scholars bring attention to the ways in which the promotion of carbon markets distracts attention from the imperative of changing existing modes of 'extractivist' capitalist production and consumption (Wright & Nyberg, 2014).

In such a case, the inclusion of gendered concerns into carbon markets could be likened to what Roberts (2015) calls 'Transnational Business Feminism' promoted by a coalition of states, financial institutions, the UN, corporations and NGOs. She argues that the "business case" for gender equality entails the insertion of gendered interests in an otherwise inequitable system, tends to promote and reproduce oppressive frameworks underpinned by the global feminization of labor, erosion of support for social reproduction and the splintering of feminist critiques of capitalism. As others point out (e.g. Gregoratti, 2016), the troubling aspect of the emergence of a business case for gender equality is how it makes feminist emancipatory goals coincide with the corporate logics of growth, profit, and brand management.

<sup>4</sup> Partnership for Market Readiness, 'Using Carbon Revenues' (2019), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32247/UsingCarbonRevenues.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>5</sup> UN, 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', A/RES/70/1 (25 September 2015).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gendersmartinvesting.com/> (accessed 15 September 2021); Women Effect, 'What is Gender Lens Investing?', <https://www.womeneffect.com/what-is-gender-lens-investing> (accessed 15 September 2021); <https://www.gendersmartinvesting.com/climate-gender-working-group-about> (accessed 15 September 2021).

As is also clear from the work of many scholars, capitalism has deep patriarchal and racial underpinnings. There is agreement among many different feminists (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 2006) that the narrow description of productive labor deriving from Marx 'and yet inattentive to him' (Mies, 1986:48) has erased women's labor from accounts of capitalism. Poor women in the global South, often low paid with precarious livelihoods as well as few social benefits in particular, may be seen as the 'edge populations constructed by racialized capital' (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 2), at the mercy of the new globalized carbon markets (c.f. Westholm & Arora-Jonsson, 2015).

Yet, as Gibson-Graham (2006:53) and others (e.g. Larner, Fannin, & MacLeavy, 2013; Newman, 2013), including the Community Economies Collective<sup>7</sup> argue, capitalism might not be so dominant as we might think. Critiques give too much power to the capitalist economy as an arbiter of possibility. Global financial markets imagined as deterritorialized, are in fact material structures, but discursively constructed through its relations and anchored in specific places (de Goede, 2005). In contrast to the globalocentric discourse of the disempowering effects of capital, capital and actors are more vulnerable and contestable than corporations are assumed to be, as they too mobilize various resources to reach their goals and where change may be possible (Bergeron, 2001). Gibson-Graham (2006; 2008) and the CEC collective use the language of 'diverse economies' to widen the identity of the economy to include all those practices excluded or marginalized by the theory and presumption of capitalist hegemony.

This gives us hope that change is possible and that new experimental economic relations in local contexts have the potential to change unequal development and environmental (climate) relationships, in particular, in encounters between global development and local lives. We examine the experimental attempts of the W+ Standard™, an initiative of a women-led non-profit civil-society network of gender and natural resource management professionals (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management, WOCAN). The W+ Standard seeks to capitalize on the focus on carbon markets and the current interest of the private sector in questions of gender equality. The W+ Standard is a methodology that ensures that gendered inequalities, including women's often invisible care work, are accounted for, by quantifying and certifying benefits for women involved in community development and climate projects. The aim of the W+ Standard is to ensure that resources are directed to women in communities where projects are established to support work and economies normally outside of mainstream projects, by offering project developers the opportunity to apply the Standard to their projects.

This article, written primarily by the first author Seema Arora-Jonsson, is a result of conversations between Seema, an academic working on environmental and climate politics, and Jeannette Gurung, a gender, environment and development practitioner, founder and Executive Director of WOCAN, and initiator of the W+ Standard. We draw on our research and long experience of working with local groups, activists and policymakers on gender and environmental issues. We embarked on this conversation from different but also similar trajectories. For Seema the need for such a dialogue emerges from a frustration with overarching denunciations (albeit also needed) of the current capitalist system in existing academic scholarship. In her view, these have provided few openings for change on the ground and general calls for local action and democracy continue to run a parallel course and with marginal effect on the life of capital and businesses that dominate the current capitalist system.

Jeanette, with a mission to support women professionals and women's community groups engaged in environmental work, has felt the need to respond to business attempts to engage with climate politics and gender justice. For WOCAN, this has meant needing to engage and reach out to business interests by speaking their language. For us both, it

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.communityeconomies.org/>.

has felt important to conduct a dialogue across the academic practitioner divide to ensure that social justice and gender are integral to business approaches and importantly, that our work makes a tangible difference for women and men at the receiving end of development and environmental projects. There is a tension in our conversation as WOCAN's language of carbon markets and a 'business case' for gender equality came up against Seema's critiques of its many limitations. In such instances in the text, we have clarified and reflected on our differences and on the opportunities to bring about the change needed for climate transitions with social justice.

A feminist conversation that connects critical academic thinking with business as well as practice on the ground is crucial for enabling social and policy processes to address problems of environmental change. It raises questions essential to dealing with the crises we face today: What does it mean for global environmental change when activist feminist organizations long involved in holding corporations accountable, adopt new strategies that may entail partnering with them? Is this an example of co-optation? Or can feminist organizations, by defining the terms of engagement, create partnerships that enable 'going beyond the business case' (Bergeron & Healey, 2015) and enable climate transitions in practical and sustainable ways? We believe that while these efforts might be local, 'place-based economic politics has the potential to be globally transformative' (c.f. Gibson-Graham, 2006:xvi). Viewing carbon offsets markets as something that need to be reformed (Bumpus, 2011) and for it being possible to use them for alternative ends, might enable political space for 'new economic becomings; a place from which to build something more desirable in the future (Gibson-Graham, 2006) by subjects who are also guided by motivations of care, ethical concern and collectivity.

Critical feminist thinking is sorely needed in climate action and the world of business, especially if there is a desire to create a more just and sustainable world. We believe that engaging with and bringing a gendered approach to the world of business, where questions of reproduction or violence or women's time are central, while not transforming it wholly and immediately, has the potential to chip away at business as usual, and may contain the seeds for transformation towards gender and socially just climate transitions.

Such a conversation is equally important for the academy. Critical discourses, also in feminist work, are increasingly estranged from practice on the ground, despite feminist theory's deep roots in everyday practice. This is not to say that such feminist conversations are not taking place across the world, but that the productive tensions and pragmatic solutions that such conversations occasion do not often make it into academic discourse and overarching critiques of capitalism or neoliberalism. We need analyses that go beyond singular conceptions of neoliberalism and feminism to find a 'politics of the possible' that is also emancipatory (Arora-Jonsson, 2013:107; Newman, 2013; Larner et al., 2013; Carr, 2020; Gibson-Graham, 2006; 2008; 2011; Bergeron & Healey, 2015).

We place our questions at the intersection of the critical literature on carbon markets and the mainstreaming of gender into environmental and development programmes, as the idea of gender equality as a business case and in extension, the W+ Standard, may be seen as an attempt to mainstream gender in climate finance. We begin by charting the origins of carbon markets and briefly review some critiques (Section 2). We go on to discuss the broader literature and provide a framework and point of departure for analyzing and working towards gender justice in encounters between global markets and local relations and work (Section 2). Following this, we describe how the W+ Standard came to be, how it is intended to work and how it envisages that carbon markets might consider questions of gender and power (Section 3). In the light of the literature, we discuss the way in which initiatives such as the W+ Standard might potentially contribute to addressing or aggravating the inequalities inherent in the markets themselves (Section 4).

While the W+ Standard does not aim to undertake a wholesale reformation of the carbon market, we explore how practical solutions

such as the W+ Standard might provide grounds for incremental change (while the work of dismantling the current system continues). Following Newman (2013), who challenges singular conceptions of feminism and neoliberalism to offer a political-cultural analysis that does not erase the 'possibility of politics' (Spaargaren and Mol, 2013), we explore if opening up a space for the politics of the present (in our case, the carbon markets) may make space for the political agency of women in such projects and enable a shift in business as usual.

## 2. Carbon markets, development programs and social justice

The agreement to establish the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit saw the beginning of formal negotiations to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.<sup>8</sup> In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol created a framework to enable trade in emissions reductions.<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, financial institutions, businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were creating a parallel voluntary market that would allow companies and individuals to purchase credits from emission reduction projects in the Global South. The emission reduction credits from the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and the voluntary market became known as 'carbon offsets'.<sup>10</sup> It also became possible to get credits for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) (Bumpus and Liverman, 2011). International environmental markets include voluntary carbon markets where businesses, local governments, and individuals set goals for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. The implementation of climate programmes that build on carbon markets includes many sectors, including renewable energy, transportation, waste handling, water supply, sanitation, and land use as well as the management of forests and soils.<sup>11</sup>

Carbon markets have been criticized for commodifying peoples' relations to nature by resorting to market solutions and for feeding industrial growth rather than undertaking structural change needed to confront the climate crisis (McAfee, 2012; Huff, 2021). The implementation of climate programmes that build on carbon markets - such as REDD+ - are expected to bring about transformations that mitigate climate change and reduce poverty, by relying on local people living around forests to cease logging and earn credits.<sup>12</sup> Environmental and social safeguards are meant to ensure sustainable forest management and avoid negative impacts.

Studies of REDD+ projects show that by alienating people from resources such as forests, these programmes have instead exacerbated poverty (Beymer-Farris and Bassett, 2012; Ribot, 2011). Market-efficiency criteria clash directly with poverty-reduction priorities (McAfee, 2012). Studies reveal that in some contexts, REDD+ projects appeared to be creating new gendered inequalities as men's loss of work and income from the forests led to greater pressure on women's agricultural work as well care work in the home (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2016). Feminists have pointed to the co-optation of the language of

<sup>8</sup> UNFCCC, 1771 UNTS 107 (adopted on 9 May 1992, entered into force on 21 March 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2303 UNTS 162 (adopted on 11 December 1997, entered into force on 16 February 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Carbon Offset Guide, 'Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)', <https://www.offsetguide.org/understanding-carbon-offsets/carbon-offset-programs/united-nations-offset-mechanisms/clean-development-mechanism-cdm/> (accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>11</sup> <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/CarbonFinance.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021); UNFCCC, 'REDD+ Fact Sheets', <https://redd.unfccc.int/fact-sheets.html> (accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/12/04/showcasing-the-link-between-forests-and-climate-change-three-examples-of-redd-in-africa> (accessed 16 September 2021).

women's empowerment in REDD+ policies as way to capitalize on women's labour while doing little to deal with gendered inequalities or with the added burdens to their work of reproduction and care (Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2015).

Roberts (2015) brings attention to how businesses and the financial sector are playing an important role in shaping the global gender equality agenda. Through their narratives of financial empowerment and discourses positioning women as the 'saviours' of national economies post-2008, they leverage women as a new source of labour, also in carbon markets (c.f. Westholm & Arora-Jonsson, 2015). These tropes of empowerment obscure the labour associated with social reproduction and promote the commodification of women's bodies while simultaneously masking embodied forms of difference.

As climate change has created an existential crisis, where corporations and businesses are called upon to act, it is important to find ways in which we find new ways forward. While increasing attention has been paid to gender in business and within organizational theory (Roberts, 2015; Calás, Smircich, & Hovino, 2014; Holvino, 2010), the discussion of environmental concerns within the field of business is underdeveloped (for one exception in a related field see Bolsø, Phillips, & Sabelis, 2018). Critical scholarship has made it clear that the current system needs changing. Yet, given the power of capital, there is less discussion on how this can be done in practical terms in the here and now.

Drawing attention to the changing conceptualizations of carbon markets over time, Spaargaren and Mol (2013) make a distinction between market-based instruments of the 1980s with some innovative aspects of present-day carbon markets. They emphasize that to make use of their environmental potential and to prevent them from generating perverse consequences, carbon markets are now meant to be regulated by state, market and civil society authorities. In their view, embedding carbon markets in civil society means connecting carbon flows to households and lifestyles of citizen-consumers in a direct and meaningful manner, which can increase legitimacy and foreground climate change politics.

Going beyond the mainstream focus on carbon markets but also overarching critiques, we go on to explore if the W+ Standard, by making space for gender and power in a 'neoliberal carbon market' (McAfee, 2012) and by highlighting the 'quiet politics of everyday environmental care' (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021) that accounts for the invisible work of reproduction in global markets can, by inserting feminist goals into the system, be made to challenge the corporate logics of growth and profit.

### 2.1. Gender mainstreaming in climate economies

Given our starting point of not treating capitalism as hegemonic, static or impossible to change, we draw on feminist scholarship on diverse place-based economies at the crossroads of global currents and the hidden work, often carried out by women to examine our questions. We dwell on scholarship that highlights how gender and intersecting relations of class, ethnicity, place, work and race are dynamic and emerge together with the economy. They are not automatically subordinated to a pre-determined and inevitable capitalist economy. In particular, we turn our attention to how women's collectives have brought about change both in tandem with development projects and in resistance to them.

Climate-related sectors – and carbon markets – tend to be dominated by men which can result in social exclusion and further disadvantage women by widening the gender gap (Larson et al., 2015). Women of indigenous and other disadvantaged groups face additional hardships posed by environmental degradation and changes in climate. As feminists have pointed out over the years, the omission of, mostly women's unpaid work seriously biases discussions of the penetration of capitalist globalizing processes and limits understanding of its negative consequences as well as the potentials for change and opposition.

A great deal of feminist research on the environment has been

devoted to making visible the work women do in their environments and in the home, providing the hidden infrastructure of natural resource governance. As much feminist work has shown, reproductive work, unpaid caring labour, unpaid household labour, childcare, volunteer work, artisanal work that is not market-based, subsistence labour, and bartering and informal activities – a large share of which are done by women – are invisible in conventional global and national accounts (Ghosh, 2015). According to Oxfam's calculations, such unpaid work adds value to the economy equivalent to at least \$10.8 trillion a year (Coffey, Revollo, & Harvey, 2020). While this insight has been the staple of feminist work since the early 1970s and accepted as vital, incredibly, development and environmental governance still need constant reminding (Arora-Jonsson, 2013; Graddy-Lovelace, 2018; Yurco, 2018).

However, the inclusion of women and their work has not been unproblematic. Gender relations and economies have been taken as static rather than seen as emerging together in different contexts. Tropes of vulnerable and virtuous women, found in some research and policies and used strategically by gender activists to bring gender on to the climate agenda, can have the unintended effect of invisibilising contextual and concrete everyday problems faced by different women and men (Arora-Jonsson, 2011).

Research on gender in climate programs (Gay-Antaki, 2020) suggests that the little money designated for gender and climate change initiatives, their quick expiration dates, and the narrow understanding of gender do not allow for substantial interventions to begin to address gendered or climatic vulnerabilities. Gender mainstreaming in climate smart agricultural programs has shown that gender is incorporated in the language of projects and yet side lined in practice. This brings little benefit to women and further marginalizes their concerns (Acosta, Sv, & Mv, 2019). In an early study of carbon projects in Kenya, Wang and Corson (2015) examined a case of carbon emissions reductions as a result of women switching from traditional cookstove to energy-efficient cookstoves. They write that while women created the emissions reductions, the property rights to the reductions were transferred to the non-profit European developer. Once the rights had been transferred the women had no rights to future incomes from the trade.

Feminist aims can be thwarted and gendered concerns co-opted when filtered through development and climate programs. Yet, an assumption of an overarching neoliberal governmentality gives little breathing space to the glimmers of alternative economic and social practices that might emerge from them (Bergeron and Healey, 2015:12). Letting go of static conceptions of gender, power and male and female subjectivities help bring attention to the intersecting inequalities that lead to vulnerability in the first place (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Similarly, a move away from a monolithic vision of economy can help us recognize the diversity of alternative enterprises (cooperatives, households), alternative systems of finance as well as motivations of care, interdependence, community aid as not inevitably reproducing neoliberal capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Through an ontological reframing, we too move from a politics in which economy acts upon us to something that can be shaped by people and communities (Ibid; Cameron, 2009). We examine ahead how the W+ Standard would need to work around such obstacles by ensuring that the women are not merely recipients of development funds but are in fact partners in profit sharing and decision-making in the projects they are involved.

Research has indicated that making gender an issue to be in addressed in environmental projects, both on the ground (Arora-Jonsson, 2013) and at the global level (Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2018), although depoliticized and bureaucratized, can make space for women's groups and feminists in environmental organizations to address dimensions of power in their work in the field.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, networks of gender practitioners that go beyond the token 'gender

<sup>13</sup> For similar reflections in other fields, see Newman (2013); Larner, W et al (2013).

expert in an organization' (Ferguson, 2014) have provided the basis for taking action towards feminist aims of equality and bringing gender on board within international environmental organizations (Arora-Jonsson & Basnett, 2018).

Support for grassroots women's groups from outside agencies has been important for women to challenge unequal relations in their communities but also in the home. Outside support, sometimes in the form of merely meagre resources for micro-credit<sup>14</sup> or income generation have been used by women's group to organize themselves and make demands for gender justice that went much beyond the programs (Arora-Jonsson, 2013). As argued for by the CEC, it is important to remake the capitalist economy from the ground up – by inserting concerns that are central to it but not recognized. Feminist research on grassroots organizing indicates that change for women has often come about as a result of collective organizing, whether as the 'quiet politics of everyday environmental care' (Ibid; Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021) or when undertaken as public resistance (Brú-Bistuer, 1996). In contrast, a review of environmental policy over several years indicates that most gender mainstreaming interventions have been directed at including women into markets, making them into small scale entrepreneurs or incorporating them into existing organizations rather than addressing demands by women's collectives outside mainstream organizations (Arora-Jonsson, 2014).

We examine if the way in which the W+ Standard is conceived would be able to provide that much needed support for women on the ground and if so in what ways. At the same time, the question of paying for unpaid reproductive work, such as that suggested by the W+, is far from simple. We emphasize that such programs cannot replace public provisioning. In the past, governments have tended to rely on payment for reproductive work, such as cash transfers, instead of ensuring public provision (Ghosh, 2011). In places where payments for reproductive work have been useful in reducing poverty, they have been in addition to public provision.

The W+ Standard aims towards certifying equity results in development and environment projects, including those engaging with the carbon markets and considers women's work, both at the individual and collective level. Keeping in mind the work cited above, we go on to reflect how by recognizing women's productive work in programs, the Standard may provide a space to ensure more equitable markets and by doing so, change these markets.

### 3. Scaling up of voluntary carbon markets and the business case for gender

The post-Paris climate regime sees sub/nonstate actors as key elements in catalyzing global action on climate change.<sup>15</sup> Increasing numbers of businesses, especially in the Global North, are looking to offset emissions in the short to medium term by funding forestry protection or renewable energy projects in the Global South that can absorb or avoid CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>16</sup> The sector is tipped to grow rapidly as companies make net zero emissions pledges and look to purchase credible offsets to tackle emissions that cannot be easily reduced at source.

It is estimated that to meet the surge in demand for offsets, the

current private sector carbon markets would need to grow by at least fifteenfold to reach US\$50-100bn annually between 2019 and 2030.<sup>17</sup> To address this challenge, a private sector Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets (TSVCM) – renamed the Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market (IC-VCM) was initiated by the Institute of International Finance (IIF) and former Bank of England Governor in 2020.<sup>18</sup> The IC-VCM includes 50 members from six continents representing buyers and sellers of carbon credits, standard setters, the financial sector, and market infrastructure providers, including representatives from major global corporations.<sup>19</sup> The IC-VCM is supported by a Consultation Group, composed of subject-matter experts from more than 80 institutions. A similar organization, the Voluntary Carbon Markets Integrity Initiatives (VCMI) was established as a multi-stakeholder platform to ensure voluntary carbon markets make a significant and meaningful contribution to climate action and limit global temperature from rising to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, while also supporting the achievement of the UN SDGs.

In addition, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has launched a Carbon Council that intends to work with key public and private sector partners to encourage greater liquidity, transparency, accessibility, and standardization in carbon markets for funding coordinated global climate action.<sup>20</sup> The development of the new Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSA) and the tightening of emissions caps in established cap-and-trade schemes such as the EU emissions trading scheme<sup>21</sup> are expected to provide a further boost to the global carbon markets.

As of early 2022, both the IC-VCM and VCMI have engaged gender experts to mainstream gender into their initiatives. This decision was at least in part due to the advocacy of WOCAN members who made a submission to the TSVCM stating that despite its stated good intentions on SDG alignment and consideration of social co-benefits and impacts on communities, indigenous groups and women in particular, the draft recommendations of the TSVCM ignored gender and power altogether. These recommendations contain no operative recognition of the importance of gender and social justice objectives and their inter-relationship with climate mitigation and CO<sub>2</sub> reduction goals.<sup>22</sup>

While the discussion on gender within carbon markets is still in its infancy, the parallel discourse on gender equality as a business case has seen companies and investors increasingly talk about promoting gender equality as an opportunity for growth. This is presented as more easily responding to transition demands, increasing profitability, and shifting business models directly through jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities. This was enabled, in part in 2008, when the World Bank launched a global forum for leaders in the private sector to develop the Bank's Action Plan for Gender Equality.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, UN Women and the UN Global Compact established the United Nations Empowerment

<sup>17</sup> Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets, *Final Report* (January 2021), <https://www.sustainablefinance.hsbc.com/-/media/gbm/sustainable/attachments/voluntary-carbon-markets-a-blueprint.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021) 2.

<sup>18</sup> Institute of International Finance, 'Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets: About Us', <https://www.iif.com/tsvcm> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>19</sup> 'Private Sector Taskforce to Help Scale Up Voluntary Carbon Markets', *Reuters* (15 September 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/climate-change-offsets-int/private-sector-taskforce-to-help-scale-up-voluntary-carbon-markets-idUSKBN25T24G> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>20</sup> <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/icc-launches-carbon-council-to-drive-greater-liquidity-in-carbon-markets/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>21</sup> <https://news.trust.org/item/20210628074908-h38d6/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TSVCM-Phase-2-Open-Letter-Gender-Equality1.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/phlntrpy/notes/world\\_brochure.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/phlntrpy/notes/world_brochure.pdf) (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Also criticized for being another co-option into neoliberal development.

<sup>15</sup> 'secretary-General, at Paris Conference, Says Governments Should Continue Spirit of Compromise to Protect Planet from Climate Change' *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases* (12 December 2015), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sgsm17410.doc.htm> (accessed 15 September 2021), cited in Hale (2016).

<sup>16</sup> 'Demand for Nature-based Solutions for Climate Drives Voluntary Carbon Markets to a Seven-Year High' *Forest Trends* (5 December 2019), <https://www.forest-trends.org/pressroom/demand-for-nature-based-solutions-for-climate-drives-voluntary-carbon-markets-to-a-seven-year-high/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

Principles (WEP), a voluntary code of conduct for companies wishing to promote seven gender commitments.<sup>24</sup>

In 2014, UN Women set up an advisory body for the private sector that brought together ‘corporate citizens that already demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting women and girls.’<sup>25</sup> Through these forums, the idea of gender equality as a business case took shape, that is, the idea that gender equality is rational corporate investment (c.f. [Gregoratti, 2016](#)). As the literature above indicates, in practice this has meant the roll out of various gender initiatives by project developers without much involvement from the women whom they targeted or in acknowledgement of the diversity among the people, both men and women that they encountered. We go on to examine the W+ Standard in this context and WOCAN’s aim to capitalize on business interest in gender equality.

#### 4. The W+ Standard

The W+ Standard™ was created by WOCAN – a women-led global non-profit network of mostly women professionals in the agriculture, forestry, and livestock sectors established in 2004, working primarily in the global South.<sup>26</sup> WOCAN is run by a small staff of 2–4 people situated in the US, Europe, and Asia that relies on selected WOCAN members as gender trainers and W+ Experts, called ‘Core Associates.’ WOCAN conducts studies on gender in relation to agriculture and natural resource management (e.g., REDD+), as well as capacity development on gender integration into organizations for governments, donor agencies, UN agencies, NGOs, rights-holders, and research organizations, among others. WOCAN has conducted two country and regional level gender assessments, prepared a gender policy manual, and strengthened internal capacities to support accreditation with the Green Climate Fund (GCF).<sup>27</sup>

In 2015, WOCAN initiated the W+ Standard motivated by three things. First was a sense of frustration that despite best efforts, gender mainstreaming was not producing the hoped-for results. Second, WOCAN wanted to address the fact that environment organizations were not actively working for gender equality, seemingly because they did not perceive risks or gains from doing so. Third, and most importantly for WOCAN, was the need to bring new funding for women’s groups and others engaged on issues of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

WOCAN started to learn about how environmental organizations were measuring and valuing environmental impacts through monitoring carbon emissions reductions, creating units as tradable assets, and using these markets to fund forestry and renewable energy projects. In 2011, keeping with its desire to generate funds for women’s empowerment initiatives, WOCAN leaders and Core Associates began to wonder whether they could create a similar strategy for women’s organizations across the world. From research and their experiences in the field, they believed that grassroots organizations were key to solving global problems of food security, climate change, and poverty. The hope was to be able to create a sustainable stream of income, not subject to the whims of donors, at a time when funding for women’s organizations working on

gender equality in the fields of development and the environment was increasingly being cut. Given the widespread acceptance of the market-based approaches in development, they began to consider the possibility to design a process through which women’s organizations could measure results of the projects they were involved in, be certified, and even monetize their social and environmental impacts through the creation of tradable units, thus incentivizing businesses and civil society to integrate gender within climate change activities.

The W+ Standard emerged after consultations with WOCAN local staff and two women’s groups in rural areas of Nepal and Kenya. In each session, participants were asked ‘What is women’s empowerment, what does it mean to you? What should we measure?’ Both of the groups highlighted specific priorities: time, income and assets, knowledge and education, health and leadership. In Kenya, women added ‘food security’ to the list, stating that they are at risk of violence if they are not able to fulfil their socially prescribed role of food provision. These six domains highlighted the material realities of women’s everyday lives and reproductive work, aspects missing in existing climate projects that have sought to insert women into markets or seek to capitalize on their labour (c.f. [Wang & Corson, 2015](#); [Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2018](#)). Methods and indicators were created by WOCAN and its network members to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to establish a baseline, then to measure the results of project interventions.<sup>28</sup>

With the W+ Standard, WOCAN aimed to build on current market-oriented results-based financing mechanisms to compensate women for their knowledge and labour, to increase the rigour and gendered accountability of project-level initiatives, incentivize new investments in women’s empowerment and aimed to create new independent revenue for women’s groups.<sup>29</sup> Certification under the W+ Standard is based on a gender analysis in the planning stage that requires projects to look at impacts on different women in communities.<sup>30</sup> W+ credits are issued on the basis of the recommendations of independent auditors.

The independent verification body for the W+ Standard is the Social Audit Network (SAN). The verification process involves a review of all project design documentation, site visits and consultation with key stakeholders including the women participating in project activities, after which time W+ credits are issued based on the verifiers’ recommendations. SAN trains verifiers in the W+ Standard methods and processes and oversees all verifications.<sup>31</sup> The monitoring and verification processes take into account which communities benefit and can provide ‘gold’ status credits to those that bring benefits to the most marginalized. As a result of the review process by external gender experts and third-party auditors, WOCAN believes that companies and investors reduce their risks for actions that may just be ‘pink washing’ in addition to ‘green washing’. Consultations are required to identify and listen to women from different social groups and identities and to ensure inclusion across age, class, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, and other social categories. The W+ Standard is designed to require distribution of at least 20 per cent of the profits of certified W+ credit sales to women’s groups, where it could be used to fund user-identified needs.

##### 4.1. Creating a recognizable tool for organizations and businesses

According to WOCAN, businesses and organizations wanting to invest in gender equality have often felt at a loss as to what they can do, particularly if they have little in-house knowledge of gender. The World Benchmarking Alliance assesses and compares how companies are advancing and promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment

<sup>24</sup> UN Global Compact and UN Women, ‘Women’s Empowerment Principles: Equality Means Business’ (2011), <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2011/10/women-s-empowerment-principles-en%20pdf.pdf?la=en&vs=1504> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>25</sup> ‘UN Women Launches Private Sector Leadership Advisory Council’ *UN Women* (2 June 2014), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/6/private-sector-leadership-advisory-council-launched> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.wocan.org/the-w-standard/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>27</sup> UNFCCC’s financial mechanism that allocates resources to low-emission and climate-resilient projects and programs in developing countries.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/w-domains/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/W-labelled-CERs-2019-presentation.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/requirements/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>31</sup> See Social Audit Network, <https://www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk/about-us> (accessed 16 September 2021).

across their entire value chain reports. Under its Gender Benchmark, the Alliance found that only 20 per cent of the companies studied consult with relevant parties, such as women's organizations, gender experts, or potentially affected women, as part of their risk identification and assessment process.<sup>32</sup>

WOCAN believes that the W+ Standard provides a way for businesses and other actors wanting to work with gender equality to certify their projects in order to generate tradable W+ units, that enables them to have a monetary value. One W+ unit represents a ten per cent change, from a baseline number, in one woman's life within one domain for the specified monitoring period.<sup>33</sup> For example, if measuring women's empowerment within the Time domain, an intervention that increases one woman's leisure time by ten per cent will generate one W+ credit.

Once measured and verified, the units are owned by the project developer, who can sell them. W+ units can be purchased by individuals, companies, governments, or investors – similar to the way carbon offsets can be purchased, through intermediaries or online platforms. The project developers own the emissions reductions. Twenty per cent of the value of the units has to come back to women's groups as a financial payment. The price of W+ units is not fixed and is determined by the project developer and interested buyers. The early W+ units sold for a price between \$2.40 – \$5.00 but more recent units are selling for \$15–20.

Project developers determine a reliable and transparent mechanism for the transferral of funds during the planning phase for the W+ Standard process, but do not otherwise decide what the funds are used for. It is women themselves who determine their needs. These funds are meant to be disbursed to women's groups, through mechanisms such as women's banks and women's funds. Where women's groups might not exist, there is the possibility that funds go to individual women instead. Projects that repeat the process of the W+ certification for multiple years must verify that women have received the funds properly and can report on the results of their self-determined activities.

The W+ Standard can be applied to climate and non-climate related projects in the Global South and elsewhere to provide indicators and measure results of activities within at least one of the W+ domains. When used in combination with carbon emissions reductions activities, projects can receive both carbon and W+ certifications simultaneously, to generate 'W+ Labelled VCUs' (voluntary carbon units). Assuming that a project developer is measuring carbon, the W+ Standard can be used in one of two ways: (1) as a label onto the carbon credit that allows the unit to be sold at a higher price or (2) for a project to 'stack' W+ credits onto carbon credits. An example is a forest and wildlife conservation project in Kenya that generates carbon units through tree planting. It supports activities that invest in women and yield benefits that extend to their communities. This Kasigau Wildlife Corridor REDD+ project is measuring results related to the W+ domains of Income and Assets, Health, Education, Knowledge and Time to sell W+ labelled carbon units.<sup>34</sup>

Individuals, businesses, and investors can purchase W+ labelled carbon units from emissions-reducing projects that also address gender equality.<sup>35</sup> The mechanisms that the W+ Standard provides are familiar to businesses and investors already engaging with carbon markets, providing a standardized solution for companies and others that do not have the resources to implement gender activities, or the mechanisms to

assure benefit sharing with women that they engage with in the project. As many impact investors are seeking projects that address both gender and climate goals, WOCAN believes that the option of labelling carbon offsets presents an important opportunity in this area.

At the 2021 COP in Glasgow, there was a major demand from countries in the global South to increase funds for adaptation in order to allow local communities cope with environmental change. In this context, WOCAN regards the W+ Standard as a way to use climate mitigation funding (using carbon markets) for adaptation purposes (through the 20 % share with women), bridging arbitrary project boundaries between mitigation and adaptation for local groups as well as integrating adaptation and mitigation responses as called for by many.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4.2. Foregrounding women's work in carbon markets: Examples of W+ Standard in practice

To date, the W+ Standard has measured and certified improvements in the lives of over 28,000 women in South and Southeast Asia and Southern Africa in fourteen projects, ranging from renewable energy biogas and cookstove projects to financial literacy and community development programmes.<sup>37</sup>

In Nepal, a government programme implemented by the *Alternative Energy Promotion Centre* that constructed household biogas plants linked to toilets across the country, the W+ Standard was used in the two districts of Kavre and Sindhupalchowk to certify a time savings to 7200 women of 2.5 h/day as a result of the switch from wood fuel to biogas. Monies received from the sale of the W+ units were used by 12 women's groups to pay for a water supply system, diversify their kitchen gardens, and expand their savings and loans operations.<sup>38</sup> These funds were distributed and monitored through a national women's NGO that was already engaged with the women's groups. One of the women's groups in Nepal discussed their desire to use their profits from the W+ unit sales to help poorer women in their communities obtain biogas digesters. WOCAN does not know if the funds were actually used for this purpose, however, if they were, then the next time the project measured women's empowerment, the greater number of women involved would generate higher levels of units and thus larger profits for women in the community.

The W+ indicators provide data on issues that are frequently overlooked in development and climate projects. For example, as part of a W+ Standard certified project in communities near a large solar installation run by a private company, Acwa power, in Bokpoort, in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, young women participated in training related to sexual and reproductive health, leadership, and work-related skills.<sup>39</sup> Under the certification scheme, 2083 women experienced a 41 per cent change in their level of knowledge and education, generating 85,403 W+ Knowledge & Education Units. Activities that promoted this change included campaigns to reduce gender-based violence and reduce teen pregnancies, the employment of young women as peer-to-peer educators and workplace skills development training. The project has not sold units as yet but it shows the way in which the W+ Standard may be applied to promote and measure gender equality in practice.

In working with projects for the past seven years, WOCAN feels that for many women, the process of asking them questions provided an

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/publication/gender-findings/companies-must-do-more-to-support-women-workers-in-their-supply-chain/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>33</sup> W+ <https://www.wplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/W-Webinar-1-Dec-6-2018.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021), 15.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/project/kasigau-corridor-redd-project-phase-ii-the-community-ranches-kenya>.

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.wplus.org/verra\\_wocan\\_streamlined-process/](https://www.wplus.org/verra_wocan_streamlined-process/) (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap20\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap20_FINAL.pdf); [https://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/topic\\_adaptation.php](https://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/topic_adaptation.php).

<sup>37</sup> Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam, Morocco, South Africa, Lao PDR, Honduras and Cambodia.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/project/biogas-stoves-project-in-nepal-2/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Signed-PDD-Bokpoort.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2021).

opportunity to reflect on needs they had but could not articulate in ‘development speak’. This happened in both Vietnam and Nepal. Local women were employed to collect data for the W+ Standard and were given an orientation on how to use the survey and ask questions in the communities. While not intended at the outset, having local women do the orientation and data collection has had empowering effects, as they had never before been in the position of a researcher, but had always been the subject of someone else’s research questions. At least ten additional projects are planned in Asia/Pacific, Central America and sub-Saharan Africa for 2021/2022 funded by international donors, foundations, companies, and multilateral development banks.

WOCAN was invited to present the W+ Standard as a solution to address gender issues in climate action at several high level forums including the High Level Event of the UN SDG Summit in New York, at a panel of the GCF Independent Evaluation Unit at COP 25 in 2019.<sup>40</sup> The W+ Standard was recognized by the UNFCCC with the *Momentum for Change Women for Results* award in 2016 for its application to Nepal’s biogas project<sup>41</sup> and endorsed by Verra,<sup>42</sup> the World Bank, UNDP, and the Independent Evaluation Unit of the Green Climate Fund.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, the uptake of the W+ Standard and market demand for W+ units has been small. Many organizations remain unaware of the W+ Standard and WOCAN attributes this, in part, to its small size, NGO identity, and lack of marketing resources and personnel. They believe that what is needed are demonstration projects and sales of W+ units from a few large and visible companies, governments, or investors. Though W+ applications are not always associated with carbon projects, the reluctance could also be related to confusion around carbon markets and their somewhat unsavoury reputations.<sup>44</sup>

The W+ Standard might be seen as trying to bring onboard the many different concerns of everyday life and local economies in marginal areas in the global South onto the global world of business. The framing of the W+ Standard process ensures attention to context by requiring a focus on intersecting dimensions of power that divide communities. It aims to ensure that funding is based on an assessment of the place and its crosscutting relations of gender and power rather than overarching assumptions of women’s vulnerability or environmental virtue, eagerly reproduced in development circles but also criticized in research on gender and climate programs (c.f. Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Gay-Antaki, 2020; Acosta et al., 2019).

The central place of women’s collectives in the process of the W+ Standard corresponds to research that has shown that change at the grassroots has often come about through women’s groups although environmental policy and programs have tended to focus mainly on individual women (see review in Arora-Jonsson, 2014). As the example from Nepal suggests, working with collectives would be more likely to ensure space for intra community (ies) discussions and negotiations on differential power and wealth.

The W+ Standard also highlights the importance of organizations such as the Social Audit Network (SAN), involved in the verification process and their understanding of social justice issues in development and climate programs. The SAN offers help for those wanting to become social auditors in their own organizations. Keeping in mind past research on the importance of outside support for women’s groups in pushing for equitable change, further thinking on the processes around the possibilities of methodologies such as W+ process itself much continue to take into account relations between various actors within and outside

the communities and collaborative research with different social groups such as the women involved in data collection and research on the ground.

In the following concluding section, we go on to think through some of the implications of using the carbon markets rather than rejecting them completely, in order to advance gender equality.

## 5. Conclusion

Carbon markets have been criticized for commodifying nature. The inclusion of women from the Global South into structurally unequal markets weighted in favour of powerful organizations, especially those in the global North, could be a further co-option of women’s work to serve industrial interests. Putting a price on women’s work also entails a commodification of their work and time, of the kind of work that many believe cannot be priced. In this respect, efforts by WOCAN with the W+ Standard may also be seen as a co-optation of the language of gender equality for a ‘business case’ and a ‘transnational business feminism’ that works to reinforce the unequal status quo (Gregoratti, 2016; Roberts, 2015). WOCAN and the W+ Standard do indeed tread a terrain that could be co-opted by a market meant to serve other interests and of projects where their addition may be little more than lip service to the rhetoric of gender equality.

At the same time, the increasing attention given to carbon markets today as a tool for climate interventions means that these markets cannot be disregarded. We look upon WOCAN’s efforts as a pragmatic approach that is part of ‘diverse and flexible strategies for resistance and influence in order to seize opportunities that may arise in countering the depoliticizing force of global climate governance’ (Westholm and Arora-Jonsson, 2018). Given that the material relations of finance and gender are discursively produced in interrelated processes at the global and local levels (de Goede, 2005; Arora-Jonsson & Basnett, 2018), we discuss how the W+ Standard’s efforts to make inroads into and change business discourse that otherwise has nothing to do with social justice is involved in such a process. We also examine what putting a price on women’s work may imply for support for women’s solidarity at the grassroots.

First, the expansion of carbon markets has led WOCAN to design a tool that speaks the language of business. As we note above, there is in fact, very little engagement by the business world with larger questions of climate and gender justice. The W+ Standard helps to demonstrate how buyers of carbon units can also support women’s empowerment, through markets that they recognize and understand and we hope, help to infuse the results-based development and climate financing approach with approaches that that also pay heed to social justice. If the upscaling of the carbon market provides new sources of investment to develop carbon credits for mitigation projects, as proposed by the IC-VCM, VCMi and ICC, it is important to ensure that women are designing, engaging in and benefiting from these projects as well – as entrepreneurs, business and community leaders, consumers, and members of women-led co-operatives and groups. By putting a fair price on women’s work and using an accounting approach, the W+ Standard makes intersectional inequalities visible and provides pathways towards accountability for ensuring effective, gender responsive climate action.

Second, as we argue above, the W+ Standard foregrounds and makes visible the reproductive and productive labour performed by women, often overlooked in climate and development projects. It provides a way to acknowledge and even compensate women – for their unremunerated care work for their environments – a global good that should be paid for by those who benefit from clean air, water, and forests and values women’s knowledge, skills, and networks. WOCAN argues that it is often the contributions of women’s unpaid labour that enables carbon emissions reductions. For example, in the case of the Nepal project, women’s maintenance of the biogas digesters was critical for generating the carbon units that were sold by the government.

WOCAN also believes that the Standard challenges stereotypes of

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.wplus.org/category/events/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>41</sup> <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/momentum-for-change/women-for-results/the-w-standard> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>42</sup> <https://verra.org/>.

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.greenclimate.fund/about/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Frédéric Mousseau, ‘Carbon Colonialism: <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/carbon-colonialism-press-release>’ (accessed 16 September 2021).



women as climate change victims, by harnessing market forces to work for women and the environment. There is the danger that such rhetoric could result in women being assigned the role of virtuous environmental defenders as greater responsibility is put on them without commensurate resources or rewards (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Yet, the W+ Standard helps to foreground the work already being carried out by women and other marginal groups, work that is often disregarded or taken for granted in climate and development interventions and certainly invisible for companies far removed from the ground. By integrating gender equality projects into carbon markets, efforts such as WOCAN's can ensure that gender and its intersecting dimensions of power are a part of the discourse on climate mitigation. As research has shown elsewhere, rather than no discussion at all, even a depoliticized discussion on gender can open space for discussions of inequalities and justice because the idea of justice and gender when taken seriously by those wanting to bring about change, is disruptive (Arora-Jonsson & Basnett, 2018). If the W+ Standard were co-opted into carbon trading, the embedded gender politics of the domains and their associated indicators would to different extents also be transported, helping to chip away slowly at business as usual.

Third, as experience from the Nepal biogas as well as research (Arora-Jonsson, 2013) indicates, support to women's collectives from outside can be pivotal with providing them with the necessary status to be taken seriously as agents of change. In Wang and Catherine Corson's (2016) study of what they call charismatic carbon credits created by women shifting to low emission cookstoves in Kenya, the aim was to utilize a change in their behaviour to create emissions reductions. The women had little to gain except for acquiring the cookstoves that for the most part did not suit them. The W+ Standard insistence on a profit-sharing mechanism in order to be certified is designed to transfer resources to women's groups. WOCAN's insistence on a portion of the funds coming directly to women's groups to be used as they deem necessary could help to circumvent the instrumental use of women's labour. Finetuned and contextual analyses are essential in understanding different men and women's diverse realities. While treading a fine line, it is important to also explore how markets such as these could be used to open up a space for politics (Spaargaren and Mol, 2013) at a time when all efforts are needed. Like Gibson-Graham (2006:xxx), we have 'assiduously espoused the alternative view that co-optation does not automatically happen in the vicinity of power; that one resists co-optation not by distancing oneself from power, but through the vigilant practice of not being co-opted—in other words, self-consciously and diligently maintaining the integrity of a project.' This is something that the W+ would need to hold on to as it goes forward in its work.

Efforts such as the W+ Standard can never replace public provisioning for social protection that is vital to ensure social justice (c.f. Ghosh, 2011). Yet, their presence can help to chip away at markets as they are today and can supplement public provisioning and social policy. Like the project in Kenya (Wang and Corson, 2016), the owner of the emissions in these cases is still the project developer, not the women. WOCAN is promoting joint ownership by women as the next step in reforming an existing market by requiring a profit-sharing mechanism that ultimately transfers more resources to women as individuals, members of collectives, and enterprises to fund their self-determined community needs for climate adaptation and sustainable development. Further, while it is not necessarily an overt aim, W+ work that helps to work towards community economies links into global relations and change them. Here we are reminded by Gibson-Graham (2006: xv) that there is no perfect community economy that lies outside of negotiation, struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment, discarding the notion that there's a blueprint that tells us what to do and how to "be communal."

Last, at a time when both new thinking and action are called for, we believe that it is extremely important to carry out conversations, not only across disciplines but also across academic, practice and policy divides. It is time that as critical scholars, we also focus on how to use

current structures to change them, even as we point to their detrimental effects and 'rework familiar understandings with experimentation' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: xvii). To cite an oft repeated phrase by Kurt Lewin, there is nothing as practical as a good theory and we believe that such conversations are needed for more creative, imaginative, and just development and climate thinking and practice.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Jeannette Gurung is the founder and Executive Director of WOCAN, the organization that is part of our study here. It is an integral part of the manuscript that she undertakes a reflexive conversation on the methodologies developed by the organization that she works with – in the spirit of analyzing her own work as part of an action-research process and autoethnography.

The remaining author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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