

A Wen Briefing:

**Decolonial
Feminism and
Climate Justice**

Wen.

January 2026

Contents

Purpose of this briefing.....	2
Key messages.....	3
Colonial legacies and the climate crisis.....	3
Who counts as human?.....	4
What counts as knowledge?.....	5
Decolonial feminism and the redistribution of power.....	5
Why this matters for UK-based charities.....	6
What this looks like in practice at Wen.....	6
What decolonial feminist climate action requires.....	7
How can you get involved?.....	8
References and further reading.....	9

Purpose of this briefing

This briefing from Wen (Women’s Environmental Network) sets out why decolonial feminism must be central to climate action and policy in the UK. It explains how colonialism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism shape whose lives are valued, whose knowledge is recognised, and who bears the cost of climate breakdown. It also outlines what a decolonial feminist approach looks like in practice for Wen as an organisation working on climate, environmental and social justice.

This briefing sets out Wen’s understanding of decolonial feminism and how we apply it through our work and projects. It is intended to support charities, policymakers, funders, researchers and partners seeking to understand the issue and apply a justice-centred approach to climate action.

Decolonial feminism is an ongoing process of reflection and this briefing will be updated as it evolves.

Key messages

Decolonial feminism exposes how colonialism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism shape whose lives are valued, whose knowledge is recognised, and who bears the cost of climate breakdown.

- Colonial legacies continue to shape who causes the climate crisis and who suffers its worst impacts.
- Decolonial feminism reframes climate justice by centring the voices, leadership and knowledge of those most affected.
- Climate solutions must be rooted in local leadership, lived expertise and shared power.

Anything less risks repeating the same systems that created the crisis.

Colonial legacies and the climate crisis

The climate movement, especially in the UK and global North, is overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class. From climate Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to international decision-making spaces like the UN's COP (Conference of the Parties) summits, racial and colonial power imbalances are clearly visible. People of colour and women are consistently underrepresented in both leadership and policy-shaping roles. [The RACE Report 2024](#), based on diversity data submitted by environmental charities and funders, finds the environment and conservation workforce in the UK is made up of just 4.5% people of colour, compared with a UK working-population average of 16%.

But the issue goes beyond just diversity and representation. The lack of diverse voices in the climate sector is especially problematic because the climate crisis itself is shaped by colonial and patriarchal legacies. [Countries in the global South have contributed the least to the climate crisis, and yet bear the brunt of the crisis.](#) This is no coincidence. **Centuries of colonialism underpinned by patriarchy extracted resources, disrupted local knowledge systems, and forced economies into extractive patterns that still shape global inequalities today.** These structures continue to the present day, making a decolonial feminist approach all the more important.

Who counts as human?

In the early modern period, Europeans were in a process of understanding and classifying the world around them. Both taxonomy - the naming and organising of plants and animals - and cartography - the making and using of maps - flourished during this time. As did colonialism. A central question emerged: *Who counts as human?* And, by extension, who is classified as non-human Other?

The white, European middle or upper class man stood at the centre of this process of classification. Unsurprisingly, the white, European man was also considered the most fully human.

This distinction between the human and non-human underpins both colonialism and patriarchy and the extraction of natural resources. Things labelled non-human were considered to exist simply for man's use: trees to be chopped, earth to be mined, animals to be kept, women as men's property and people to be enslaved.

Colonialism thus was a system of extraction, justified by the belief that those exploited and gravely harmed were not truly human. This colonial agenda was also informed by and inseparable from patriarchy.

While formal colonial rule has ended in many places, this logic and extraction and dehumanisation continues. Similarly, although some elements of patriarchy have been dismantled, it still endures.

The idea of nature as something separate from humanity allows us to commodify and destroy it, while the continued dehumanisation of people of colour and indigenous communities, in particular women from these communities, enables societies to value their lives less and ignore the harms done to them.

This is relevant in the context of the climate crisis where we see a direct legacy of colonialism and patriarchy: formerly colonised countries are often most affected, and the suffering of their people is treated as less urgent, with [women in these countries disproportionately impacted](#). In the UK, the disproportionate impacts of climate change (e.g. overheating homes, toxic pollution and air pollution) on communities of colour and women are often overlooked.

What counts as knowledge?

Colonialism did not only extract land and labour; it also imposed hierarchies of knowledge. Western scientific and technical knowledge was elevated as objective and superior, while Indigenous, local and experiential knowledge was dismissed as unscientific or backward. Patriarchy was fundamental to this agenda, reinforcing gendered hierarchies that devalued the knowledge, leadership and labour of women, especially racialised women. These systems of domination continue to shape whose voices are heard and whose expertise is erased.

In the climate space, this shows up when traditional ecological knowledge is sidelined in favour of technical solutions, or when local communities are invited to “consultations” but denied real decision-making power. Communities most affected by climate harm are often invited to share experiences but excluded from shaping policy, funding priorities or programme design.

As a result, many climate strategies fail to reflect lived realities, overlook cultural contexts, and can reinforce existing inequalities, in particular racial and gender inequality. When knowledge is extracted without power-sharing, climate action risks reproducing the very systems of harm it claims to address.

Decolonial feminism and the redistribution of power

Decolonial feminism challenges these systems by examining how colonialism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism operate together. It asks critical questions: whose knowledge is centred, who is recognised as an expert, and who holds decision-making power?

Decolonial feminism is not a checklist or a one-off intervention. It is an ongoing process of reflection, resistance and unlearning. It recognises that oppression is intersectional and that justice cannot be achieved by addressing climate, gender or race in isolation.

Applied to climate action, decolonial feminism demands a shift away from extraction - of resources, labour and stories - and towards shared leadership, mutual learning and accountability.

Why this matters for UK-based charities

Decolonisation is often framed as something that happens elsewhere, in former colonies or the global South. This framing obscures the role of the UK in building, financing and benefiting from colonial systems whose impacts continue today.

British institutions, including charities and environmental organisations, are shaped by these histories. They hold power through access to funding, platforms, policy influence and public legitimacy. Without intentional reflection, this power can reinforce the hierarchies decolonial feminism seeks to dismantle.

Decolonial feminism reminds UK-based organisations that justice is not only about global solidarity. It is also about examining positionality, redistributing power and creating space for communities most affected by environmental injustice within the UK to lead.

Power operates not only through governments and corporations, but through narratives, assumptions and whose voices are amplified. For charities, this means resisting the urge to speak for communities and instead committing to working with them - and, when appropriate, stepping aside.

What this looks like in practice at Wen

At Wen, decolonial feminist principles shape how programmes are designed and delivered. All of our work starts from the belief that local knowledge is valuable, authoritative and essential to just climate solutions.

The Just FACT programme, creating the building blocks for an alternative food system in Tower Hamlets, used participatory grant-making to shift decision-making power to local residents. This approach recognises that people closest to the issues are best placed to determine what will work for their communities.

Wen's Climate Sisters and Climate Siblings programmes focus on changing who has a seat at the climate table. They support racialised and marginalised women and gender-diverse people of colour to lead climate conversations by compensating participants for their time, strengthening peer networks, and valuing lived experience

as expertise. The emphasis is on co-creation and listening, rather than extraction or representation for its own sake.

These approaches move away from models where institutions define both the problem and the solution. Instead, they reflect the core principles of decolonial feminism: shared leadership, mutual learning and trust in community knowledge.

What decolonial feminist climate action requires

Climate action will only be just when it is shaped by the people who live with its impacts every day. Decolonial feminism provides a framework for understanding how power, history and inequality shape the climate crisis - and for building responses rooted in listening, shared power and accountability.

To build climate solutions that are just, effective and lasting, we must:

- **Centre the leadership, knowledge and lived experience** of women and gender-diverse people most affected by climate injustice, particularly racialised and marginalised communities in the UK;
- **Share power, as well as stories**, by co-producing priorities, policies and programmes with communities, and ensuring decision-making, resources and credit are fairly distributed;
- **Challenge colonial and patriarchal assumptions** about whose lives matter, whose knowledge counts and who is seen as an 'expert' in climate action;
- **Embed decolonial feminist principles in organisational practice**, from governance and funding to partnerships, communications and accountability;
- **Reject extractive approaches** to consultation, research and storytelling, and commit instead to long-term relationships, mutual learning and trust;
- **Work collectively to influence funders, policymakers and institutions** to adopt justice-centred approaches that address the root causes of climate breakdown, not just its symptoms.

For organisations working on climate justice, a decolonial feminist approach is not an optional add-on or a matter of values alone. It is essential to creating climate

solutions that are equitable, effective and capable of addressing the structural causes of the crisis, rather than reproducing them.

How can you get involved?

Support campaigns and initiatives that focus on decolonial feminist action, including:

- Wen's Environmenstrual and Green Baby campaigns and Climate Sisters and Siblings;
- Advocate for the addition of a commitment to decolonial feminism in policy initiatives relating to the climate emergency.
- Review and improve individual organisational policy and practice.
- Join together to organise and campaign for environmental, gender, racial and social justice.

References and further reading

Lugones, M. (2010). [*Toward a Decolonial Feminism.*](#)

Quijano, A. (2000). [*Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America.*](#)

Spivak, G. C. (1988). [*Can the Subaltern Speak?*](#)

Wynter, S. (2015). [*On Being Human as Praxis.*](#)

About Wen (Women's Environmental Network)

We are an environmental charity working on issues that connect women, health, equity and environmental justice. We take an intersectional feminist approach to tackling the climate and nature emergencies.

We support women and communities to take climate action, amplifying racialised and marginalised women's voices, and advocate for systemic change. We cultivate grassroots projects, connect women to nature, create blueprints for just food systems and put gender and intersectional equality at the heart of the green economy.

We were the first charity to connect gender, health, equity and environmental justice. Since our radical beginnings in 1988, Wen's groundbreaking campaigns have tackled issues from air pollution and plastic packaging to toxic chemicals in menstrual products and cosmetics.

Our vision is a world where women, communities and the planet flourish because our society is equitable, collaborative and caring.

For more information visit [wen.org.uk](https://www.wen.org.uk) and follow us on social media

Instagram - https://www.instagram.com/wen_uk/

Linkedin - <https://www.linkedin.com/company/women's-environmental-network/>

A note on inclusive language: We have used the word 'women' throughout this briefing, but Wen views issues from a gender and intersectional perspective and is inclusive of gender non-binary, trans and gender non-conforming people.

Written by Nnenna Onwuka, Feminist Climate Justice Policy Campaigner at Wen, with input from Wen's Co-Directors Kate Metcalf, Zarina Ahmad and Roshini Thamotheram, Head of Movements.

Wen
20 Club Row
London
E2 7EY

info@wen.org.uk
wen.org.uk
@wen_uk

Wen.