



# **WOMEN'S VOICES IN ENVIRONMENTAL SPACES**

A Manufactured Narrative

**WRITTEN BY**

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## *women's voices in environmental spaces*

The fight for environmental justice and sustainable living has long been pioneered by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) globally, yet white women seem to be the face of environmentalism within Canadian environmental movements. Many environmental spaces in Canada, where policy and decision-making is discussed, are white-dominated. The zero waste bloggers and vegan influencers who we see promoted on social media explore pages are predominantly white women (Bansal, 2020). White women talk about wanting to implement intersectional environmentalism, but why would they when many feel it takes attention away from their work?

Black women, Indigenous women, and other racialized women are leaders of environmental advocacy and have been for generations, yet somehow their work is recognized as secondary to white women's activism. Environmental spaces, specifically within Canada and the Global North, are predominantly displayed in the media as being women-led; while that is a step forward, it in itself is not groundbreaking. The Global South, a place that predominantly racialized people reside in, is already experiencing the devastating impacts of the climate crisis (Smith, 2021). Leaders in these countries are

already coming up with innovative solutions to mitigate climate change within their communities (R, 2019), and are the ones who should be given a global platform, not the ones who have the privilege of skipping school to sit outside a government building rather than having to work daily or take advantage of any potential education opportunities. This is not to discredit the work of prominent environmental activists who are white women, but to question the systems that give them a voice over BIPOC women, who have been doing this work for generations with minimal recognition, and often, criticism.

Black, Indigenous and People of Colour have been environmental activists long before the environmental movement became something considered to be 'mainstream' or 'trendy' (KAIROS, 2019). Many immigrant families utilized practices that are now seen as 'zero waste trends' because they were more affordable when they first came to Canada (Bansal, 2020). Now these same practices are being sold as a new and innovative way to reduce waste, usually marketed by and to white women. Mending clothing, re-using bags, and thrifting are some prime examples of this phenomenon.

White women are frequently held up as the exemplary version of how an environmentalist should show up. We see images of Indigenous, Black

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and brown women at protests and defending land, portrayed as angry or violent. Yet we see white women posed beside 'Sustainable Development Goals' infographics or shaking hands with politicians. The former implies the message of disruption, anger, violence, otherness, and the latter seems to imply that this is the 'correct' way to go about creating change (Teelucksingh, 2007). We see images online of Indigenous women protecting old growth forests while being beaten down by police, but see photos in newspapers of white women marching at protests accompanied by those same officers, using the excuse of 'safety' in order to justify police presence.

True environmentalism works to disrupt the capitalistic and industrialized systems that got us into the climate crisis. So why is it that the same women who benefit most from these systems are the ones being showcased as the saviours of what this system is destroying? Ultimately, it seems to come down to this: white comfort is more important than any real change while we operate in this white-run nation that is so-called Canada. This stems from a history of global colonization, and the predominantly white leaders and public figures represented within the Global North. Colonisation and

the erasure of BIPOC voices are intrinsically intertwined (Jackson, 2020). Next time you see BIPOC voices being muted within environmental spaces, speak up and publicly question why an event may have speakers who all look about the same: most often, white women. I urge white women who work within these spaces to become true allies of BIPOC women by using your platform and privilege to learn about and amplify BIPOC voices within environmental work. I recognize that at first this may feel uncomfortable, but regardless of this discomfort, in order to be a true ally, acknowledging the privilege white women hold within environmental spaces is a necessity. It is imperative that BIPOC women's voices and solutions be heard in order to be able to forge an equitable path to true climate justice.

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