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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Eco-Gender Narratives: Reporting at the Intersection of Climate and Social Justice

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: SUSTAINABILITY

Extra Module

By: Skill Up Srl

SKILL up CONSULTING TRAINING

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1. Why this subject matters

Environmental degradation, climate disasters and exploitative corporate practices are rarely gender-neutral. When an ecological crisis strikes, it can act as a threat multiplier for gender-based violence by displacing communities, increasing severe economic stress and disrupting vital social services. Highly profitable industries like fast fashion often rely on the systemic economic exploitation of female labor, masking these abuses behind "greenwashed," eco-friendly marketing campaigns. When journalists compartmentalize "environmental news" from "social news," they inadvertently erase the female experience from the public narrative.

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2. Learning Outcomes



01

Learners will be able to define **social sustainability** and recognize how **environmental degradation** and **climate crises** disproportionately increase the risk of GBV for women and girls.

02

Learners will be able to identify **"greenwashing"** in media narratives and uncover the hidden **gender exploitation** within seemingly "sustainable" corporate supply chains.

03

Learners will be able to apply **interconnected thinking** to report on climate disasters, ensuring the **social consequences** are integrated into environmental coverage.

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3.Definition

Social Sustainability : The foundation of social equity, ensuring all individuals have access to basic needs, human rights, and equal opportunities, helping build communities where everyone can thrive regardless of gender or socio-economic status.
Greenwashing: The practice of a company marketing itself as environmentally friendly while masking activities that pollute the environment or exploit their workforce.

4. How our mind reacts

When processing complex global crises, the human mind naturally tends to **compartmentalize information** into distinct silos, often separating "environmental news" from "social issues". This cognitive separation comes from the structure of our societies and organizations and how they are traditionally built, relying heavily on centralized, hierarchical structures.

Nature however operates quite differently, functioning as a **complex, decentralized, and highly interconnected network**, like the root system of a forest for example.

By shifting away from rigid mental silos and adopting this interconnected "plant intelligence" mindset, journalists can retrain their brains to see the hidden threads linking environmental events—such as resource scarcity or climate disasters—directly to spikes in gender-based violence and female economic exploitation.

The Neurolinguistic Connection and the Data

To understand this neurolinguistic connection, consider the data provided by the UN Environment Programme. Studies show that up to 80% of people displaced by climate change are women. When media narratives fail to use an intersectional vocabulary—framing a drought solely as an "agricultural crisis" rather than a "humanitarian and gender crisis"—they actively shape public perception. This cognitive framing minimizes the trauma of displaced women and obscures the direct correlation between resource scarcity and the sharp rise in domestic violence, transactional sex, and human trafficking in affected areas. Language shapes reality: omitting the female experience from environmental reporting normalizes their invisibility.

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5. Common media mistakes

Journalists frequently limit the scope of their reporting by treating environmental events as **isolated ecological** or **economic issues**. When a natural disaster strikes, the media focus almost exclusively defaults to property damage and financial loss. This narrow lens ignores the well-documented reality that gender-based violence and human trafficking reliably spike during times of environmental stress.

In the corporate sector, reporters easily fall victim to **greenwashing** by echoing eco-friendly marketing campaigns without deeper investigation. A news outlet might applaud a fast-fashion brand for using biodegradable packaging while failing to report that the women manufacturing the garments still face **severe economic exploitation** and semi-slavery in the supply chain.

Finally, coverage routinely erases the specific struggles of female environmental defenders. News stories often overlook the **uniquely gendered threats** these activists face, including **sexual violence** and organized **smear campaigns** designed specifically to humiliate and silence them.

Spotting the Mistakes: Headlines in Practice

To put this into perspective, we can analyze two common types of journalistic framing that inadvertently support bias.

Headline 1: *"Fashion Brand X Launches Revolutionary Eco-Friendly Packaging."* The hidden mistake here is the perpetuation of corporate greenwashing. By focusing exclusively on the environmental angle, the journalist completely ignores the well-documented exploitation of the predominantly female workforce in the brand's supply chain in developing countries, effectively silencing their narrative and struggles.

Headline 2: "*Tragic Floods Destroy Regional Infrastructure and Cost Millions."* While factually correct, this framing isolates the ecological event from its social impact. It fails to report the predictable surge in gender-based violence that consistently follows the displacement of families. Treating the disaster as a purely economic loss rather than a catalyst for social vulnerability removes women from the core of the story.

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6. What good practice looks like

Fast-fashion companies are increasingly stating on their labels that their clothing is produced sustainably, promoting their supposed sustainability and adherence to better working conditions. Oftentimes however these companies are doing what is defined as “**greenwashing**”.

A decade after the Rana Plaza textile factory collapse in Bangladesh, which claimed over a thousand lives, a rigorous investigation by Greenpeace exposed how major international fashion brands use **self-made 'green' labels** to mask a deeply broken system. The report analyzed the sustainability claims of twenty-nine major corporations, including H&M, Zara, Decathlon, and Italian brands like Benetton and Calzedonia.

Rather than validating these corporate marketing strategies, the reporting highlighted that labels such as 'Conscious,' 'Join Life,' or 'Green Bee' often amount to textbook cases of greenwashing. These internal programs frequently rely on untraceable supply chains, a lack of independent third-party verification, and a false narrative of circularity —such as using recycled polyester sourced from other industries rather than recycling old garments.

True investigative journalism moves past deceptive terminology like 'eco' or 'sustainable' to reveal that a business model built on low-cost, disposable linear production can never be truly sustainable.

GREENPEACE ITALY, 27/04/2023



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7.Case study

Women and natural disasters

Across the globe, many areas experience natural disasters that impact the population in severe ways. Floods, droughts, earthquakes, they all affect women and children way more than men. According to UN Women, the climate crisis is never "gender neutral". Because women in these regions bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel, environmental scarcity forces them to travel further and work harder, often leading young girls to drop out of school to assist. Climate change acts as a "threat multiplier", escalating social and economic tensions in ways that drastically increase women's vulnerability to gender-based violence, human trafficking, and child marriage. **UNWOMEN.ORG**

- How can reporting highlight the underlying gender inequalitiesthat create this dangerous gap in survival and recovery?
- Is it possible to apply an intersectional lens tothe reporting to ensure you are accurately representing the compounded risks faced by specific marginalized groups in the affected regions?

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8. Practical Exercises

01 The Ripple Effect Map

Objective: Take a recent local environmental news story (e.g., a heatwave, a flood, or a factory opening) and map out the secondary social impacts.
Expected outcome: Students recognize how environmental disasters increase vulnerabilities for women in specific communities.
Duration: 30 minutes.
Materials: A large sheet of paper (flipchart) and markers, or a digital collaborative whiteboard (e.g., Miro, Mural).
Instructions (step-by-step):

- The Core Event: Draw a circle in the center of your paper and write down a recent local environmental crisis (e.g., a severe drought, a flood, or a natural disaster).
- The First Ring (Physical & Economic Loss): Around the center, draw a first ring of immediate consequences that the media typically focuses on, such as property damage, agricultural crisis, infrastructure destruction, or financial loss.
- The Second Ring (The Eco-Gender Impact): Now, draw lines connecting the first ring to a wider circle of hidden social consequences. For example, link "displacement of families" to a predictable surge in gender-based violence, or link "resource scarcity" to women facing severe economic stress and exploitation.
- The Narrative Gap: Take a red marker and circle the specific social and gendered consequences from the second ring that were completely compartmentalized or ignored by the local press.

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Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- Why does the human mind, and specifically the traditional journalistic workflow, tend to separate "environmental news" from "social issues" into distinct cognitive silos?
- Look at the red circles on your map. How does omitting the female experience from this environmental reporting actively shape public perception and normalize women's invisibility?

- Freelancer Tip: How can you use this "Ripple Effect Map" to pitch a unique, intersectional story to an editor who thinks the newsroom has already covered the environmental disaster?



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02 The Interview

Objective: Study a press release from a fashion brand claiming to be "sustainable" and formulate highly targeted interview questions aimed at uncovering the brand's true social sustainability practices and their treatment of female workers.
Expected outcome: Students learn to properly fact-check brand statements, pierce corporate PR evasion, and directly link environmental greenwashing to gender-based economic exploitation in the supply chain.
Duration: 25 minutes.
Materials: Pen, paper, and the Fictional Press Release (below).

Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Read the Fictional Press Release:
2. *"FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE. Global Fashion Brand X is proud to announce the launch of our new 'Earth Conscious' collection. In our commitment to a greener planet, 100% of our new packaging is biodegradable, and we have integrated recycled polyester into our flagship garments. We are revolutionizing the fashion industry by putting the environment first. Join us in our journey towards a sustainable future."*
3. The Scenario: You are attending the brand's highly anticipated press conference. The PR manager announces that due to a tight schedule, each journalist is allowed to ask only two questions.
4. The Task: Draft your two exact questions word-for-word. You must avoid generic attacks; instead, your questions must force the CEO to move beyond environmental buzzwords (like 'biodegradable packaging') and directly address the economic exploitation and working conditions of the predominantly female workforce in their developing-world supply chain.

5. The Test: Read your questions aloud to the group. The group will evaluate which questions are the most "airtight" (i.e., the hardest for a PR executive to dodge or answer with a generic environmental slogan).

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- Why is it so difficult to formulate a question that prevents a corporate spokesperson from retreating into safe, pre-approved environmental slogans?
- How does the media's uncritical repetition of corporate labels like 'conscious' or 'eco-friendly' actively mask the semi-slavery conditions of female garment workers?
- Freelancer Tip: If the PR department refuses to answer your questions during the press conference, how can you use their "no comment" as the driving hook for your investigative article?



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03 Rewriting the Eco-Gender Narrative Object:

- **Read the following fictitious news agency dispatch:**

"A severe prolonged drought in the southern agricultural district has led to a 40% decrease in crop yields. Economists warn of a looming recession and urge the government to subsidize farmers to prevent bankruptcy."

Notice how this text completely ignores the social and gendered impact of the crisis. Your task is to rewrite the headline and the lead paragraph (maximum 5 lines) applying an intersectional lens. You must integrate the ecological and economic facts with the social consequences, such as the increased risk of domestic violence due to economic stress, or women being forced to walk longer, unsafe distances for water.

Expected outcome: Students actively train their critical thinking and empathetic communication by breaking cognitive silos. They learn to seamlessly weave the female experience and social sustainability into standard environmental reporting, actively rewriting the narrative



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Resources

Gender dimensions of disasters

An article about the impact of disasters and hazards on certain categories of people
LINK

UN WOMEN, Gender dimension of disaster, Women's Resilience to disastars knowledge hub, https://wrd.unwomen.org/practice/topics/gender-dimensions

Sustainable Journalism

Publication made by the European Federation of journalists on sustainable journalism
LINK

Gruber M., Sustainable journalism, from local to global. Good practices in Europe, European Federation of Journalists 2024 https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Sustainable-journalism-from-local-to-global-good-practices-in-Europe.pdf

Ecofeminism

Publication explaining the meaning of ecofeminism and why it is important
LINK

Federici E., Why Ecofeminism Matters, Narrating/translatin Ecofeminism(s) around the world, No. 20 (2022): Changing the (Cultural) Climate with Ecocriticism and Ecolinguistics , Iperstoria https://iperstoria.it/article/view/1256

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