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Malgorzata Smieszek-Rice, PhD
Research Fellow
UiT The Arctic University of Norway
PO Box 6050 Stakkevollan
N-9037 Tromsø
Norway

Review of the doctoral dissertation titled
Climate change response in the European Arctic states
from the feminist perspective
written by mgr Victoriia Verezhak
and prepared under the scientific supervision of dr hab. Michal Luszcuk

The review is prepared based on the decision nr 23/2024 of Rada Naukowa Instytutu Geografii Społeczno-Ekonomicznej i Gospodarki Przestrzennej Wydziału Nauk o Ziemi i Gospodarki Przestrzennej Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie that appointed me as a reviewer of the doctoral dissertation titled “Climate change response in the European Arctic states from the feminist perspective” written by mgr Victoriia Verezhak (hereinafter the Author or the Candidate) and prepared under the scientific supervision of dr hab. Michał Łuszcuk.

As a foundation in preparing this review I have considered the requirements listed in relevant Polish national legal acts and regulations. In particular, I have focused on three key elements: a thesis shall present the general theoretical knowledge of a doctoral candidate in a specific discipline; it should demonstrate candidate’s ability to independently conduct scientific work; and it shall constitute an original solution to a scientific problem. In addition, in writing this review I referred to the document of Rada Doskonałości Naukowej titled “Recenzje w postępowaniach o awans naukowy. Poradnik” (Warszawa, 2022) available online on that institution’s website (accessed 8 January 2025). The review is prepared in English which is also the language of the presented doctoral dissertation.

The overall structure of the thesis

The presented monograph consists of the introduction, 5 substantive chapters, and conclusions to the thesis. The introductory chapter presents scope and aim of the conducted research, its goal, background, and an overview of leading publications. It also outlines research gaps in the field, followed by the presentation of a theoretical framework and research methodology selected and used by the doctoral candidate. It concludes with presenting the structure of the thesis.

Substantive chapters follow a logical order, starting from a very thorough overview of the gender and environment nexus as a theoretical framework for ensuing research. Next, the Author introduces the concept of socio-spatial inequalities and how they present themselves in the Arctic. Importantly, right at the beginning of that chapter the Author draws our attention to an important knowledge gap about climate change's role in influencing and shaping social inequalities – the point which she returns to later. She continues from there with the introduction to the Arctic and the impacts of climate change on Arctic environment, infrastructure, governance, and population. The chapter concludes aptly by raising the importance of gender aspects in climate change in the region. Chapter 5 presents the climate change response in European Arctic states, conveniently following the same structure for each one of them – introducing a profile of a country as an Arctic state, providing a short brief on its national climate policy, governance of climate adaptation, and on the inclusion – or a lack thereof – of gender in the covered climate change actions. The last substantive chapter is the pinnacle of the work as it contains the main findings of the research and the application of feminist evaluation to the climate change response policies of five Arctic states in question.

The thesis is completed with conclusions that include valuable recommendations for the improvement of climate change response in the region.

1. The assessment, along with justification, of whether the doctoral dissertation presents the general theoretical knowledge of the person applying for the doctoral degree in a specific discipline

Already the very first paragraphs of the dissertation make very clear both a research gap and the importance of filling it. They also explain why bringing together fields of geography and

feminist studies is a well thought out path to yield promising results for the research task at hand – encouraging reader to follow the Author through her process of scientific inquiry. As defined by the Author, the aim of the presented study is “to disclose deficiencies and gaps in the climate change response of five European Arctic states (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark/Greenland) facing new comprehensive social and environmental challenges in the region in the 21st century” (p.7). To achieve that goal, the Author formulates 4 main research questions which guide her through the research process and which she answers in the final chapter of thesis.

Before going any further, I would like to applaud and underline that already the selection of the research topic speaks highly of the candidate’s nuanced understanding of the field(s) proving her ability to have a wide overview of relevant literature and to identify important research gaps, significant not only in academic terms but also with valuable practical implications. It is worth to note that the choice of the topic is particularly impressive given that the candidate is not based in the Nordic/European Arctic state where the engagement with the undertaken issues could appear little more obvious or closer to discussions or realities “on the ground”. Still, even in these circumstances, recognizing such a consequential research gap would call for acclaim and, from further afar, merits it even more.

The overall choice of theory – feminist geography – is particularly fitting to shed light on the intersections of gender equality and climate change as the discipline bridges feminist politics and theories with a geographical focus to elucidate the connections between gender, place, and space. Chapter 2 that presents the theoretical and methodological frameworks is very well construed and makes a strong, convincing case for situating the study within the selected approach. What this reviewer appreciates is that already at the beginning of the chapter, the Author explains that feminist research as a transformative approach that is both socially and politically motivated, differs from a traditional one. Not only it aims to challenge, but also to *change* (emphasis of this reviewer) social inequality (p.20). Moreover, the Author notes that even though feminism is strongly concerned with women’s voices and experiences, it does not exclude other minorities or suppressed groups. To the contrary, it seeks to equally pay attention to and elevate them – the observation reflected in the ultimate findings of the Candidate’s research.

It is a real pleasure to read how the Author logically and smoothly moves from stating the scientific problem and arguing for the feminist perspective as integral to addressing it; through the

broader context for gender-environmental relations and an overview of a highly relevant concepts of environmental justice and (in)equality; to the introduction to the doctrine of feminism and a subchapter dedicated exclusively to ecofeminism which she unpacks skillfully and in sufficient detail. References to environmental ethics as well as a presentation of two schools within the ecofeminist philosophy: social and cultural one guide neatly to the influences that the ecofeminist thought had on geography, which then lead to the more in-depth coverage of the feminist geography in subchapter 2.3.

The central part of the chapter constitutes presentation of the feminist evaluation which is the primary analytical tool applied by the Candidate. As the Author notes and proves in her work, “the comprehension of feminist research (which is then based on feminist theory) serves as the foundation for feminist evaluation” (p.15).

If there is a thing that this reviewer misses in the thesis and in the opening chapters, it is a provision of a definition of gender. While the term is at the core of the undertaken doctoral work, we hardly find it defined anywhere, and certainly not in any clear or outstanding manner. Even if the meaning of the term might feel obvious to some, such understanding should not be taken for granted. Moreover, dedicating some space to defining the term “gender” would allow to include in the discussion the perspectives of Arctic Indigenous Peoples who regard gender on their own terms and who are key rightsholders in the region with the existential stakes in the climate change response. While a reader can find some references to it in the text, altogether this aspect could be much more clearly articulated, similarly as the concepts of “gender equality” and “intersectionality”.

Despite this minor omission, the Author proves that she has a good general knowledge of relevant theories and is able to eloquently engage with quite distinct topics, including feminist frameworks and their evolution over time, socio-spatial inequalities, and the particular features of the Arctic region, which she chose as a geographical locus for her inquiry. This itself, namely the ambition expressed through seeking to weave together these various threads of ever-growing importance in the climate-changed world, is worth pointing out and evaluated positively.

Summing up this part, I believe the presented doctoral dissertation clearly demonstrates the Candidate’s theoretical knowledge pertaining to the discipline and the selected topic of inquiry. Presented overview of literature and of relevant approaches show the ability to constructively and

critically select material, and present it in a coherent, well-structured fashion laying solid foundation for the originating questions and next steps in the research process.

2. Assessment and justification of whether the doctoral dissertation demonstrates the ability to independently conduct scientific work

The presented doctoral dissertation proves the Candidate's ability to independently conduct scientific work. As noted above, the selected method – feminist evaluation – is adequate to the task at hand and so are the materials collected and analyzed qualitatively for the purpose of the work. Altogether, policy documents of five European Arctic states as well as the carried out semi-structured interviews constitute a good basis to answer questions posed by the Author. Regarding the interviews, this reviewer appreciates that the Candidate did not confine herself to having them only with officials from relevant ministries and/or ministries for foreign affairs, but also with experts and representatives of civil society/non-profit organizations – the resultant picture is much more nuanced and deepened. The methodology of research is sufficiently and clearly described. That being said, there are several issues that appear as shortcomings and could be addressed better or corrected.

First, a minor point that might have only to do with the poor choice of words but naming official climate policy documents as secondary sources is slightly misleading and could be differently phrased.

Second, the Author mostly missed to note that the European Arctic states happen to all be also Nordic states which for long time have stood out on a global arena as the champions of gender equality with traditionally some of the highest ranks in relevant gender gap indices and evaluations. It is well understood that the label of “European Arctic” states makes perfect sense in the context of the dissertation focused on the Arctic region, but it misses the additional dimension that would come from pointing out even more paradox nature of the lack of sufficient engagement between gender equality and climate change domains in the countries that seek their pride in some of the highest equality standards in the world and, simultaneously, experience some of the most dramatic climate changes in their northern parts. What would likely need to follow from raising this point about countries included in the study is that the Candidate would need to include relevant national

documents and strategies pertaining to gender equality to illustrate and further enhance the observation about the commitment of five Nordic – European Arctic – states to the principle of gender equality. While it would unavoidably expand the source material and add to the analytical effort, it could also generate additional insight and quite likely inform the work in significant fashion.

Third, the sources that the Candidate uses when it comes to presenting the state of climate change in the Arctic could be updated and complemented with much newer/more recent references. This is not to say they are incorrect, but rather to observe that part of Arctic reality – including studies focused on the region, whether in natural or social sciences – is how rapid are the changes unfolding therein, including the climate. Whereas only a few years ago (for example in 2019), the assessments of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP), one of the Working Groups of the Arctic Council (AC), spoke about the twofold increase in temperatures in the Arctic compared to the rest of the world, it is now established that the increase is closer to 3-4 times, as asserted both by AMAP but also the global International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Once again, the information selected and referenced by the Candidate is not incorrect, but it is to encourage greater diligence and meticulousness for future work and research efforts.

Fourth, in the longest, sixth chapter in the dissertation the description of the documents in question (climate policies and Arctic strategies) is often too long and far too detailed, without sufficient concentration on matters central to the posed questions and the focus of the research. It is, of course, understandable that the Author wants to outline the documents as faithfully as possible, but it becomes challenging for a reader to distill and distinguish issues of importance from the scores of background/additional information. The case where this is perhaps the most visible is the Kingdom of Denmark where, given the work's focus on the Arctic, aspects of the country's climate change response relevant only to the continental part of the Kingdom (i.e. Denmark itself) could be spared, leaving more space for even more elaborate treatment of the cases of, first and foremost, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. It would be also very helpful if, in addition to a table summarizing findings at the end of each subchapter about the European Arctic states, there would be a few sentences summary capturing the main points of nearly 20 pages of text dedicated to each country.

Finally, it is noticeable that the further in the thesis, the more frequent are language deficiencies, including punctuation, insufficient care in quotes from the interviews (including, e.g. adjusting the pronouns from the transcripts), and repetitions – overall, the quality worsens in the latter parts of the thesis. Regarding the repetitions, reiterating certain things in the text and dissertation of such length is, of course, unavoidable and, in fact, makes reading and following the main threads and questions much easier for the reviewer and the readership. Still, too easily noticeable verbatim repetitions are more disturbing than facilitating and should have been corrected in the final editing stages of this dissertation process.

3. Assessment and justification of whether the doctoral dissertation constitutes an original solution to a scientific problem

As noted earlier, already the fact that the Candidate identified and decided to focus in her inquiry on the intersection of gender and climate change speaks highly of her research “instinct” to address issues theoretically sound and of high practical importance. The application of feminist evaluation, a well suited, yet demanding analytical tool, yields valuable results and answers the questions posed by the Author. Interestingly, in accordance with the main tenets of the feminist approach that seeks to give voice and elevate perspectives not only of women but all the marginalized groups, the presented research findings point to groups insufficiently included and/or considered in the climate change policy making processes and practices. These groups include people with low income, older citizens, the youth, as well as immigrants. We can see then how factors such as age, ethnicity, wealth, nationality come to the fore – albeit only to reveal that there is still a long way to go to engage with and respond actively and appropriately to different people’s needs. With a few exceptions, gender as a category appears to be mostly missing from the climate change responses of the European Arctic – Nordic – states, despite their steadfast commitment to advancing gender equality across all spheres of life. Even if one wished for different results, those presented do not come as a major surprise given that the intersection of gender and climate change, even in the Nordics, is still considered a relatively new phenomenon. This is despite the fact that it is well documented in both academic literature, policy-oriented reports and publications, and it has been a standing item on the agenda of international bodies and organizations for more than 20 years, including in such central instruments and fora like the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Partial explanation for this state of affairs might have to do with the fact that until now the recognition of the gender-climate change nexus has mostly taken place in relation to the countries of global South, with a far and few in between studies focused on the global North, and even less on the High North or the Arctic. This, obviously, does not make the topic less relevant – to the contrary, it further highlights existing knowledge gaps and once more points to the maturity and deepened knowledge of the Candidate who decided to address this important issue and, in result, presented an original solution to a scientific problem.

If there is an aspect that this reviewer would like to see more clearly laid out in thesis it would be to see the positionality statement of the Author so, in line with the principles of feminist evaluation, we would learn about her personal perspectives, experiences, and characteristics that are inevitably brought into the evaluation process. That being said, shortcomings like this one are acceptable at the early stage of research career of the Author and it is a tall order for a researcher, even much more experienced and seasoned one, to follow all along the ideas and presumptions of the feminist evaluation, especially those of its steps where the evaluator is called to express their own position and views, but also further, when they are called to engage in steps that could help addressing existing inequalities and promote and advance greater equality. If anything, the point raised here could be considered a recommendation for the Candidate to consider to further develop and enhance for her future work– from the already presented, good, and well-evaluated level.

Conclusions

In coming to conclusions of this review, I believe the Candidate has demonstrated the general theoretical knowledge in her discipline of choice; proven her ability to independently conduct scientific work; as well as presented an original solution to a scientific problem.

As the Author pointedly noted, “compared to a general understanding of rising temperature impacts on the ecosystem, the knowledge of the social dimensions of climate change in the Arctic is still limited” (pp.18-19). Mgr. Verezhak’s dissertation presents a valuable and original contribution to the academic body of knowledge on both the Arctic region as well as globally relevant gender-climate change nexus. The study helps to fill gaps in regional Arctic studies, socio-economic geography, as well as in gender/feminist studies complementing them with still relatively infrequently addressed thematic of the Arctic and the northern latitudes.

In sum, in my opinion the doctoral dissertation of mgr. Viktoriia Verezhak **meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations** as they are articulated in relevant Polish legal acts and regulations. Accordingly, I commend and request to admit mgr. Viktoriia Verezhak to the next, ensuing steps of the doctoral process.

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