

11 February 2025, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

Review of the doctoral dissertation «Climate change response in the European Arctic states from the feminist perspective» by Viktoriia Verezhak, MA, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (Lublin, Poland).

Reviewed by: Dr Ingrid Agnete Medby, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Newcastle University (United Kingdom).

Introduction and basis for review:

I was appointed by The Scientific Council of the Institute of Socio-Economic Geography and Spatial Management of the Faculty of Earth and Spatial Management (UMCS), by Resolution No. 23/2024, as a reviewer of the doctoral dissertation of Ms. Viktoriia Verezhak, MA, on 10 December 2024.

In my review I have relied on the guidance and regulations provided in firstly, the “Act of July 20, 2018 Law on Higher Education and Science”¹, in particular Art. 187 on the Doctoral Dissertation; and secondly, the “Rules of Procedure for the Conduct of Proceedings for conferring the degree of doctor at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin”², and in particular Chapter 4, § 13 and § 14.

As such, I have assessed the dissertation on the basis of its demonstration of (1) the candidate’s general theoretical and disciplinary knowledge, (2) their ability to independently conduct scientific work, and (3) that the subject of the doctoral dissertation is an original solution to a scientific problem. I elaborate on each of these in what follows, before concluding with my recommendation for admission to public defence.

¹ “USTAWA z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce” <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/prawo-o-szkolnictwie-wyzszym-i-nauce-18750400> (accessed 8 February 2025).

² “Regulamin przeprowadzania postępowań w sprawie nadania stopnia doktora w Uniwersytecie Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie” <https://phavi.umcs.pl/at/attachments/2023/0626/130639-regulamin-umcs-przeprowadzania-postepowan-o-nadanie-stopnia-doktora.pdf> (accessed 16 December 2024).

1. Assessment of the candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline:

In my assessment of Viktoriia Verezhak's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline of socio-economic geography, I have focused in particular on the following aspects as detailed in the dissertation: Feminist geography and associated concepts, and Arctic scholarship. I will return to how the theoretical knowledge is operationalised in the research design through the specific approach of Feminist Evaluation in section 2 of the review.

The dissertation's focus on feminist approaches is explained as important due to a general scholarly oversight of the gendered effects of climate change, and in particular the effects on women. It aims to "disclose deficiencies and gaps in the climate change response of five European Arctic states [...] facing new comprehensive social and environmental challenges in this region in the 21st century" (p. 7); followed by a number of clear research questions; and it goes on to say that it will "determine how the current policies and methods of dealing with the effects of climate change in the European Arctic can become more comprehensive, inclusive and effective" (ibid.). These are laudable and clear aims, and are both original and timely additions to the existing literature.

While the Introduction includes some "leading publications" (p.8), presented almost like an annotated bibliography that summarises specific papers – and which highlights the to-date limited scholarship on the gendered effects of climate change in the Global North – the theoretical framework is further elaborated in chapter 2. This chapter also includes the second iteration of the chosen methodology, and as mentioned below I think a separate methodology-chapter would have been very helpful for this dissertation (also to include metadata). Chapter 2 starts by outlining the connections between "gender and the environment", before turning to "ecofeminism", "feminist geography", and finally the Feminist Evaluation framework.

There does seem to be some contradiction or misunderstanding in the initial discussion of feminist research on p.15, where the candidate first states that the approach is positivist, seeking "objective" truths, before contradicting this by saying that knowledge is socially situated and questioning "scientific impartiality". Feminist scholarship in geography and elsewhere have long refuted positivist claims of quantifiable and objective truths, highlighting

precisely the situatedness (and subjectivity) of knowledge and experience. I believe this may be what the dissertation does actually apply in practice, but this particular passage is somewhat problematic from a theoretical perspective.

Given the focus on specifically gender and inclusivity, the dissertation could have reviewed these literatures more extensively (e.g. not exclusively related to climate change impacts); and it could advantageously have provided an earlier and more comprehensive discussion of what is meant by 'gender' (e.g. as mentioned on p.43). Some places there seems to be a broadly inclusive approach taken, whereas in other places in the dissertation gender seems to be reduced to a binary between 'men' and 'women' (without giving further discussion to either). And as a related point, there are some unfortunate passages that seem to present women as seemingly 'passive' victims of climate change effects, and little scope is left to consider for example women's agency and differences. This would seem to be at odds with a truly feminist approach, which does not 'take for granted' or assume certain categories or gender-roles. To cite one example, there is a claim on p. 28 that "They [women] hardly ever take part in nationally organized politics"; this seems an odd statement to make about especially the Nordic states that have recently if not currently had female leaders (as well as of course, other political appointees, diplomats, experts, etc). While no countries have achieved full gender equality, the Nordics are often elsewhere considered leaders in this field – some further reflection on this, and the relative empowerment of women especially in "nationally organized politics", seem needed here. Some of the linkages made between women and environmentalism also seem rather reductive; for example, women statistically doing more recycling than men seem less relevant, yet is repeated at least three times.

The two concepts of intersectionality (e.g. section 3.2) and [climate/environmental] justice are mentioned in the dissertation, and it would have been very useful indeed to elaborate on these further, including reviewing and citing some more of the key literature on these. Both concepts have been theorised and used extensively by geographers. However, to my knowledge combining these together with this particular Feminist-Evaluative approach is novel.

The dissertation is also positioned as an Arctic study, focusing specifically on these as titled Arctic states as opposed to e.g. Nordic or Northern European. While there is limited review of the extensive literatures on the Arctic – including, unfortunately, the rich work on gender in

the Arctic – the dissertation does provide an original addition to these. As the candidate has rightfully explained, there is unsurprisingly a lot of research on climate change (including policies and responses) in the Arctic, but few of these have assessed specifically how each state is taking gender into account or not.

The dissertation does demonstrate knowledge of theoretical approaches in the discipline, even if this is somewhat limited and in places less clear; this is commensurate with what may be expected of a doctoral project.

2. Assessment of the candidate's ability to independently conduct scientific work:

In order to assess Ms. Verezhak's ability to independent conduct scientific work, I have reviewed the research design, including methodological approach, its execution, and communication. As aforementioned, the approach applied is Feminist Evaluation; and more specifically, a combination of policy/document analysis and selected interviews.

The ability to conduct scientific work requires, firstly, an ability to design both a relevant and feasible project. I will return to the relevance of the topic (as an "original solution to a scientific problem") in section 3 of this review. Relevant here, however, is the choice to focus on the so-called European Arctic states: The Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. Russia is not included in this definition of Europe, and of course neither is the USA or Canada – these making up the three of the eight Arctic states not reviewed. The choice to narrow the focus slightly is useful, both in terms of feasibility and in terms of conclusions that may be drawn based on a level of shared political structures; however, five states is also a lot for a single dissertation, and in places more depth could have been better than breadth, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

The dissertation research is based upon a foundation outlined in chapter 3 "Socio-Spatial Inequalities in the Arctic", chapter 4 "European Arctic and Climate Change", and chapter 5 "Climate Change Response in the Region". These three chapters provide important background and detail, and as such also further justification for the project. In particular the latter chapter provides important context on the Arctic statehood of each country. There are contextual details here that could have been clarified however; for example, why there is a

statement about climate change discussion in Norway only between 2003-11 (p.92); why it is relevant that Sweden has research stations (p.88); and the misleading statements that Greenland is a sovereign state and only “closer” to self-rule from 2009 (p.97). I mention these as examples from a 5-page range, noting they are not unique across the dissertation.

Based on the chosen theoretical framework of feminist geography, the approach of Feminist Evaluation was chosen by the candidate. This is explained in the introduction (as my comment in the previous section relates to), in chapter 2, and again in a brief sub-section of (the very long) chapter 6. A separate chapter on methodology would have been helpful to more clearly lay out the approach taken, including which documents were analysed and why, some more detail on the interviewees (as below), and which time-period the study focused on specifically.

The way in which the framework of evaluation was operationalised was, as mentioned, through selected document/policy analysis and interviews with e.g. diplomats, scientific experts, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives. One issue here is that very little detail is given about the interviews; although confidentiality is crucial, knowing for example the gender balance of interviewees would be highly relevant to assess the findings. There is only a limited table appended (Appendix 2), which lists positions for each country, but this should have been elaborated and included in the body of the dissertation itself. In chapter 6, there is a statement that suggests there were 30 interviews in total (across five countries, i.e. very limited from each), but this is not presented in an unambiguous manner in any earlier part of the dissertation.

Also part of the conduct of scientific work is the presentation and clarity of expression and presentation. Here it is worth noting that following the chapters outlining the theoretical framework (ch.2), the background of the region and relevant issues – i.e. socio-spatial inequalities (ch.3), climate change (ch.4), political responses (ch.5) – the findings are presented in one very long chapter (ch.6). While each preceding chapter is around 20pp., chapter 6 is more than 110pp. It is divided into six sub-sections for ‘methodology’ (which largely repeats previous text) and each of the five countries, which could have benefitted from being presented as separate chapters instead.

Each of these are presented in a similar structure, reflecting on some selected documents and interview quotes; however, it is not always clear how each of these have been selected from a dataset of more policies and interviews. The specific evaluative results for each country's documents are presented in a table at the end of each sub-section, but without further elaboration on what the table tells us. This could have benefitted from being placed at the start of the section, with clearer and more explicit elaboration on what it adds to the discussion.

Another issue worth highlighting here is a relatively high level of repetition throughout, and as a result a relatively limited quantity of material discussed. The selection of documents and their quotes seem limited for each – likely due to the number of countries evaluated – which has the potential to risk oversights (e.g. where gender-related policies may be found elsewhere, and *applicable* to climate change and Arctic policies, even if not explicitly titled as such).

In terms of communication of findings, there are additionally three concerns I would like to raise: Firstly, the way that references are applied in the text is not always clear to the reader, i.e. making claims and statements more difficult to assess. In particular in the discussion of results (ch.6), it seems that the relevant reference is placed at the end of each paragraph, rather than in the text as is common practice. I am assuming this is to indicate that much of the preceding paragraph was based on that reference (whether a document or interview), but this is not clear – which is an issue when assessing the validity of claims. Secondly, quotes are not always clearly presented as such with quotation marks, especially from interviews. Occasionally the text uses first-person singular or plural, for it to only later become clear that it was an interviewee who was speaking and referring to their country, not the candidate. Thirdly, there are a number of spelling errors throughout, beyond the grammatical and typographical errors that should be expected for a dissertation (in a non-native language). For example, the three different versions “Saami”, “Sami”, and even “Sammi” are all to be found in the text; and acronyms such as the EEA and SDWG are presented incorrectly (there is also no list of acronyms provided).

Despite the concerns outlined above, I believe the dissertation does demonstrate the ability to conduct scientific work independently, commensurate with what may be expected of a doctoral project.

3. Assessment of the doctoral dissertation's subject as an original solution to a scientific problem:

In this section, I outline my review the subject of the dissertation as an “original solution to a scientific problem”, and more specifically a holistic overview of the dissertation's topic and findings as it contributes to the wider field of knowledge.

Returning to the project's aims, namely to identify “deficiencies and gaps in the climate change response” of the five European Arctic states, and to suggest ways in which these responses could become more just and inclusive (p.7), the study is focused on an issue that is identified as important and under-theorised in the existing literatures. The dissertation reviews some existing literature in geography and beyond (although this could have been expanded, as mentioned above), to make a claim about the gap it seeks to address. The key contribution that the study makes could have been more clearly stated from the outset, but it is original.

The study is ambitious, seeking to cover five states' policy approaches to a complex issue such as gendered dimensions of climate change. The “problem” is clearly identified, namely a lack of both scholarly work on this topic and political actions. The “solutions” as to how the latter may be improved are perhaps less clear, but the dissertation does add to otherwise limited scholarship – and it highlights an important, perhaps overlooked, issue.

Due to the project's ambitious scope, the possibility for depth on each is unfortunately impossible. The discussion of each country (and data drawn upon) is brief, as is naturally the pragmatic approach for a comparative study of this character. One suggestion would have been to carefully remove any superfluous repetition throughout, leaving more space to elaborate on each case study. In particular, the inclusion of more empirical material would have been excellent. However, while these are weaknesses, they do not detract from the originality of the study's focus.

Overall, there is no doubt that there is scope for more feminist research in the Arctic, and in geography too; and that the climate crisis is making the issues of (in)equality ever more urgent. As such, the dissertation is timely, and it is original. By posing these evaluative

questions of the five states' policies, the dissertation highlights the lack of (at least explicit) mention of feminist concerns, including but not limited to the role of women.

Conclusion:

Based on all of the above, and despite identified weaknesses, the dissertation adds an original perspective to scholarship on climate change responses, feminist research, and Arctic state politics. It is a broad scope, evaluating a number of documents as well as interviews across five states, which in turn demonstrates the candidate's independent abilities of scientific research. This was based on engagement with relevant theoretical literatures, again showing relevant knowledge underpinning the study. And finally, it presents an original solution to a research problem.

In conclusion, I state that the doctoral dissertation by Viktoriia Verezhak, MA, entitled "Climate change response in the European Arctic states from the feminist perspective" meets the requirements set out in Article 187 of the Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 742, as amended) and in the Regulations of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. Therefore, I recommend that it be admitted to public defence.

