

Jamie Sommer is currently a professor in the sociology department at the University of South Florida Tampa. I had the opportunity to speak with her about her experience as a field researcher in Gujarat, the things she has learned from studying sociology in the context of women's empowerment in climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as other social issues, and her take on how history and sociology use different approaches to study present day issues, from colonialism to female leadership's roles.

Jamie started as an undergraduate student at Montclair State University where she studied philosophy, sociology and religion. Those classes were assigned to her because she was part of a learning community, but she ended up liking those three classes and wanting to pursue those topics during her time as an undergrad. Although Jamie wanted to pursue psychology for her graduate studies, she ultimately chose to go to graduate school for sociology for several reasons. One of the biggest reasons was because sociology explains complex ideas of power and allows her to study people's behavior in their society, and also gives her the tools to explain the concept of inequality that seems to dictate how the world works.

During her Masters to Ph.D. program at Stony Brook University, she was introduced to Professor Christoff, who had just received a grant to study women in the environment, specifically in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Not only was this an excellent research opportunity, but the experience also helped Jamie to realize that she was capable of helping people and making an impact on the world during her time at graduate school. As Jamie describes, she sees Professor Christoff as a strong woman who reminded her that women can research what they want and make their own path if they choose to do so. Furthermore, Professor Christoff made the connection for Jamie with on-the-ground research and women actually adapting to climate change in real time, as well as connected Jamie to the experience of being able to speak with the local women in Gujarat. This made her work feel much more important and real.

Jamie believes that looking at climate change from a sociological perspective forces us to recognize that the issue of climate change that affects more vulnerable populations is not just influenced by outside social factors like power, inequality, or dominance in history. There are factors such as people interacting with each other, their environment, and making choices that are making their lives better or worse. From a sociological perspective, we often look at how larger issues that are going on-- colonialism, aid projects, poverty, or corruption at the national level, to name a few examples-- influence what is happening in any given community and how on one hand, these issues take agency away from these people, while also molding the actions that need to be taken to transform their situation. Most importantly, using this particular point of view to understand climate change replays narratives in sociology from a dominant society that are not necessarily accurate and helps to push back at them.

Jamie explained the idea of women's empowerment and female leadership, and how those ideas translate differently from the United States to Gujarat. In Gujarat, there is a family dynamic that differs from other parts of India, where European colonization created a structured patriarchy. While a patriarchy certainly exists, women are stuck in precarious positions where they cannot make decisions and have to answer to the head of the household, but the head of the household is not the husband, but rather the grandfather, or the oldest man in the house. The women don't have the power to make any choices, but her husband cannot make any choices either because his father is making all of the decisions-- ultimately, they are both powerless. This puts a lot of the narrative that we know in the U.S. "on their head" as Jamie says, and is the reason why leadership positions didn't really make sense to her in Gujarat. She describes the situation as a "strange mixture of the patriarchal system that we understand living in the U.S. that we got from the UK that the UK then put on this particular area of India, which is mixed with existing gender and family relations so you have a more complex picture of women's empowerment and gender roles." For example, in Gujarat, when the fields are working from climate change technology which allows women to actually have free time, one woman was genuinely excited to be able to work in the fields with her husband instead of having to get water every day. A task such as collecting water is not only very gendered, but is a task that has always been placed on women because it is an unwanted task and not valued by the people, so when a woman does not have to do that task anymore, it can be extremely empowering and almost liberating. Essentially, the way women in the U.S. study women's empowerment in climate change does not directly translate to women in Gujarat, and while female leadership is important, it is different in different contexts.

In terms of studying women's empowerment in climate change adaptation from a sociological perspective rather than a historical perspective, Jamie acknowledges the bias of perspectives present in both approaches. However, with history, Jamie says, it is difficult to think about alternatives that are possible to "the way things are done and why they are like that." The value of studying a society or a place that is different from your own is that you come to understand how different your frames are, as well as how history is written from a very specific time frame of who was in power at the time, or what story benefits the ruling class. Even source materials of how people handle climate change in the past, or someone's diary, or a government document, all have biases not just from the person writing the document, but also from us. Jamie explains that this is because many of us read history with our current time frame and it becomes particularly difficult to understand material in the context that no longer exists. Ultimately, Jamie believes that discussions from people who have different perspectives and experiences can give us a better understanding of how we can use history to interpret current issues.

