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Sociological Dimensions of Climate Anxiety in Contemporary Europe

Climate anxiety – the pervasive worry or despair about climate change and its impacts – is not distributed equally across society. As Norgaard (2011, p.28) argues, "the unequal distribution of environmental harm and the psychological burdens it creates mirror broader patterns of social inequality," making climate anxiety a deeply political experience. In Europe today, climate worries intersect with class, age, geography and other social factors. This essay examines how climate anxiety is shaped and mobilized by existing inequalities, how it differs across social groups and countries, and how grassroots movements and state policies respond. Drawing on recent European data and studies, we argue that climate anxiety both reflects and reinforces social stratification, and that addressing it requires socially just policies and inclusive activism.

Defining Climate Anxiety as a Social Phenomenon

"Climate anxiety" (also called *eco-anxiety*) refers to chronic fear or distress about climate change and environmental degradation. It includes feelings of worry, sadness, or paralysis when confronted with environmental threats (Albrecht et al., 2007; Clayton et al., 2017). Related concepts include *solastalgia* (grief over environmental loss) and *climate grief*. Importantly, these emotions arise in a social context: they are influenced by what people know about climate threats, by media and political discourse, and by personal exposure to environmental harm Youth, for example, have little power over climate policy yet bear disproportionate burdens of future risks; thus children and adolescents report high levels of climate distress (UNICEF and Eurochild, 2019; Burke et al., 2018). Indeed, nearly half of young people worldwide say climate concerns negatively affect their daily life, and 75% describe the future as "frightening. In Europe, climate change has become one of the most pressing worries for young people (Hickman et al., 202). Yet climate anxiety is not confined to youth: adults and even the elderly express climate fears when exposed to information or impacts. The key insight is that climate anxiety is shaped by social position: who you are, where you live, and what resources you have to cope.

Definitions and Scope: Climate anxiety is an emerging topic in psychology and environmental studies. It is distinguished from clinical anxiety disorders; rather, it is a rational response to real threats. As a Council of Europe report notes, eco-anxiety is "increasingly prevalent among young people" and is experienced on a spectrum of emotions (anxiety, grief, hope, etc.). The European Environment Agency (EEA) defines climate-related mental health effects broadly, noting that distress, worry and a sense of helplessness can arise in anticipation of environmental change. Importantly for sociological analysis, climate anxiety often reflects real vulnerabilities: people who already face social or economic precarity tend also to feel greater

existential threat from climate shifts. This makes climate anxiety both a personal feeling and a *social* phenomenon, deeply intertwined with inequality (Norgaard, 2011).

Social Class and Climate Anxiety

Climate anxiety is closely intertwined with social class and inequality in Europe. Environmentally disadvantaged groups – the poor, less educated, or marginalized – tend to live in harm's way, so they face real climate-related stressors (floods, heat, pollution). For example, the EEA reports that lower-income, less-educated communities suffer more air and noise pollution and greater exposure to heat and floods. Cheaper housing is often less well-built and harder to heat or cool, making low-income families acutely vulnerable to extreme temperatures. In many EU regions, poorer areas have worse environmental quality and less access to green space. These objective conditions mean that the "psychological burdens" of environmental change – from property loss to disruption of livelihoods – fall more heavily on disadvantaged groups.

European surveys confirm that socioeconomics influence climate worry, although in complex ways. An extensive European Social Survey (ESS, 2020–22) found that overall 42.8% of Europeans were "very" or "extremely" worried about climate chang. However, this study found higher worry among people with higher education: those with tertiary degrees were more than twice as likely to report high climate concern compared to those with minimal schooling. Household income per se was not a significant factor once education was accounted for. Similarly, Whitmarsh et al. (2022) report greater climate anxiety among respondents with higher climate concern and those more informed about climate issues. This suggests that better-educated or more affluent individuals – who typically consume more information – express greater eco-anxiety. By contrast, working-class people often prioritize immediate economic survival and may be more likely to deny or underplay climate messages (a pattern noted by Norgaard, 2011).

Nonetheless, recent evidence shows that all social classes experience climate anxiety to significant degrees. A UK study of over 2,100 adults found that 42% of middle-/upper-class respondents and 39% of working-class respondents reported high levels of climate fear. The authors emphasize that "people are sceptical" about lifestyle changes and instead blame larger social forces (governments, corporations) for climate harms. In other words, working-class Britons are nearly as anxious about climate change as their more affluent peers, but they may feel especially anxious about whether elites will act fairly on their behalf. As Harding (2023) observes for the UK context, working-class communities "have a keener sense" of climate impacts (floods, higher energy bills) and worry that climate policies might be unfair (e.g. rising costs). In France and Germany, recent protests by lower-income citizens (e.g. Yellow Vests, opposition to appliance mandates) similarly highlight class tensions in climate politics. Thus, while middle-class youth have led high-profile environmental movements, climate concern among the working class is real and in part reflects acute material anxieties about energy prices, insurance costs, and flood risks.

In sum, climate anxiety traverses class lines: those with more education or access to

information often feel greater *existential* anxiety about climate futures, while the less privileged feel anxiety grounded in immediate threats to their well-being. Both dynamics mirror inequality: the privileged worry about long-term catastrophic risks, and the disadvantaged worry about here-and-now climate harms. Importantly, the disadvantaged have fewer resources (financial, social, political) to cope or adapt, making their anxiety more fraught. European policy experts note that without equitable adaptation measures, "existing inequalities may be reinforced"u. For example, flood protection and heat resilience measures often benefit wealthier areas, while poor urban neighborhoods have less green space and higher exposure. This double burden – higher risk plus low capacity – creates a class-inflected climate anxiety that aligns with broader social inequality patterns (Norgaard 2011).

Age and Generational Dynamics

Age is a key factor in climate anxiety in Europe. Young people frequently report the highest climate concern and are the most active in climate movements, reflecting both altruistic anxiety and a sense of generational injustice. Surveys show that European youth rate climate change as an urgent threat. For example, in a large global survey including EU countries, 59% of young respondents (16–25 years) said they were "very" or "extremely" worried about climate change. Correspondingly, climate anxiety often motivates youth activism: students across Europe joined the 2018–2019 school strikes for climate to demand "ambitious and equitable climate action".

Psychological studies likewise find high eco-anxiety among the young. Whitmarsh et al. (2022) in the UK found that climate anxiety scores were significantly higher among younger age groupst. This aligns with many other reports (APA 2020). Youth also exhibit more climate-related sadness, anger and perceived hopelessness than older cohorts. Experts suggest this is partly because younger people grew up amid accelerating climate news and feel their future is imperiled, while having little political power (the concept of *intergenerational injustice*). The Council of Europe notes that young Europeans face a "closing window" to secure a liveable future, making them "forced to bear the burdens of past generations' actions".

However, not all European studies show youth as the most anxious. The ESS results (2020–22) found surprisingly that middle-aged and older adults reported higher climate worry than teenagers. In that survey, people aged 60–69 were more likely to be "very worried" than 15–19 year olds. One possible explanation is that older Europeans have witnessed more climate change over their lifetimes and may feel anxious about what legacy they are leaving. Another is that younger people may downplay worry because of engagement in activism – their anxiety is channeled into hope for collective action (a point Whitmarsh et al. suggest: anxiety can motivate action). Regardless, virtually all age groups are affected: even children exhibit climate-related distress. UNICEF and Eurochild (2019) report climate change is one of the biggest concerns for European children, affecting their mental well-being. The EEA notes that climate change can cause *"eco-anxiety"* or *"eco-paralysis"* among youth, impairing daily functioning

Thus, climate anxiety cannot be pinned to one generation. European societies show a complex picture: youth often express high frustration (partly because they demand structural change), while older adults may hide anxiety behind denial or policy preferences (some European studies find older people less likely to protest). The overall trend, however, is a "cross-class consensus" on climate concern, fragile as it may be. The sociological insight is that generation interacts with other factors (education, ideology, life experience) to shape climate feelings. Importantly, the sense of powerlessness is often strongest among youth, who know they will live with the worst impacts. This helplessness can amplify anxiety unless countered by engagement in collective action or supportive policies.

National and Regional Contexts

Climate anxiety varies notably across Europe's national and regional contexts, reflecting differing exposures, cultures and politics. A continent-wide survey (ESS) of 25 countries found striking differences: only about 23% of Slovak respondents were "very/extremely" worried about climate change, compared to over 55% in Germany and Spain. These patterns align with broader trends: in parts of Eastern Europe, climate change is often ranked a lower priority, whereas Western and Southern Europeans feel it more acutely. Geographic vulnerability plays a role: southern Europe is experiencing intense heatwaves and droughts, raising concern among Mediterranean populations. Conversely, some Northern Europeans may have delayed direct impacts, though regions like Scandinavia worry about policy shifts and melting snows.

Policy and media also shape worry. Countries with vocal environmental movements and ambitious climate debates (Germany's Energiewende, France's dialogues, Green parties in governments) tend to report higher anxiety. For example, Germany's large climate protests and leadership in EU climate law correlate with its high reported worry. In contrast, Poland and Czechia, where coal remains central and climate skepticism has political traction, show lower climate anxiety levels in surveys. The EU's Eurobarometer consistently finds that concern is widespread (85% of EU citizens see climate as a major problem), but national surveys reveal nuance: in the UK survey cited above, people of all regions expressed serious eco-anxiety (East of England vs Midlands had some differences in intensity).

Within countries, urban–rural divides can also emerge. A ScienceDirect analysis (Rodríguez-Planas, 2021) of European climate views (not cited here) suggests rural areas sometimes exhibit more skepticism, possibly due to lower exposure to climate policy rhetoric and greater reliance on traditional livelihoods. Conversely, urban youth have spearheaded strikes. Yet some rural and working-class communities feel climate impacts keenly (farmers facing drought, fishermen noting sea changes) even if they aren't part of green movements.

In sum, national context – including cultural narratives and policy debates – mediates climate anxiety. However, the unequal impact thesis holds: regions or groups suffering more immediate environmental risk (flood zones, polluted industrial areas) also harbor greater climate concern. For example, the EEA notes that European hospitals and schools in heat islands place vulnerable people (elderly, children) at risk. France and Italy, recently hit by

extreme floods and fires, have seen surges in climate worry. Meanwhile, Eastern European countries with entrenched coal and weaker civil society show comparatively lower public anxiety, even as they face growing hazards. This spatial variation highlights that climate anxiety must be understood in local terms of risk and politics.

Environmental Precarity and Social Vulnerability

Climate anxiety is deeply tied to environmental precarity – the condition of living in a fragile environment – which in Europe overlaps with social vulnerability. Marginalized groups often inhabit precarious places (floodplains, dense urban heat islands, polluted industrial zones), and also lack resources to move or adapt. For instance, the EEA reports that disadvantaged areas in Spain, Portugal, and Eastern Europe face both higher flood and heat risk and lower incomes. Within wealthy regions, poorer neighborhoods are nearer pollution sources and have less green space. These spatial inequalities mean that low-SES households endure worse climate experiences (overcrowded housing, food insecurity in heat, health impacts) than affluent ones – which in turn fuels anxiety and insecurity.

Moreover, climate change exacerbates existing inequalities. In Europe's ageing societies, the elderly – already a socially vulnerable group – are extremely susceptible to heat stress. Women, who often bear caregiving and household responsibilities, may feel pressure from rising costs (energy, groceries) and worry about family well-being. Immigrants, refugees and minorities tend to live in substandard housing or flood-prone camps, making them hit first by storms and sea-level rise, amplifying collective trauma. In sum, social gradients in exposure produce gradients in fear: the "unusual suspects" for climate anxiety include those with low income, poor health, or marginal status.

This intersectionality perspective is increasingly recognized. Activists and scholars note that climate injustice follows lines of class, race, gender and global North–South divides. Young activists in Europe are "increasingly aware" of intersectionality and campaign in solidarity with other movements (racial justice, Indigenous rights). The IPCC (2021) explicitly states that climate vulnerability is driven by historical patterns of inequity and marginalization. Thus, climate anxiety cannot be divorced from the broader social fabric: people's emotional responses to climate reflect the social positions they occupy. For example, a working-class family facing repeated floods will experience climate worry as part of their daily precarity, just as a professional in a hot city worries about air conditioning costs and health impacts. In all cases, anxiety is compounded when people feel powerless – a common experience among marginalized groups. European analyses warn that without equity-focused adaptation, climate change will "exacerbate social inequality" and create new injustices, which in turn will deepen public anxiety and political tensions.

Youth Movements and Grassroots Mobilization

Grassroots activism has transformed much of the climate anxiety among young Europeans into collective action. The past several years saw unprecedented youth mobilizations: the school strikes of 2018–2019 became "the largest ever global climate mobilisations," with

thousands of European students demanding climate justice. These strikes, led overwhelmingly by young people (especially young women from urban, middle-class backgrounds), brought climate anxiety into the public sphere. By framing the crisis as a moral issue affecting future generations, youth activists drew attention to the emotional dimension of climate change and pressured governments to act. Their core demands often went beyond policy tweaks, calling for "structural change rather than reform" (the "Lausanne Climate Declaration" demands). In this way, youth-driven climate anxiety became politicized: it fueled a justice-oriented, intergenerational narrative in European politics.

Beyond youth strikes, a variety of grassroots groups have emerged. In some countries, community organizations are explicitly addressing climate emotions. For instance, Councils of Europe–backed programs encourage youth workers to create "safe spaces" for climate discussion and resilience-building. Mental health professionals and educators have begun to incorporate climate education to help young people cope. The "youth sector" report emphasizes that empowering youth with agency (through education, participation in policymaking, youth-led initiatives) can mitigate feelings of helplessness.

Nevertheless, climate activism in Europe has not been uniform. Research indicates that rural and working-class youth have been underrepresented in visible movements. Gorman (2023) notes that the school strikes in 2019–2020 were "predominantly made up of young women and largely from middle class families," and that rural/working-class youth often lack "environmental-political agency". Similar findings come from a UK study of working-class youth, who felt distant from the climate discourse (Arya & Henn, 2021 as cited). This underscores that even within the "youth" category, social class matters: not all young people experience or act on climate anxiety in the same way. Some youth may channel anxiety into local or alternative actions (boycotts, community gardens, legal challenges) that mainstream surveys do not capture.

Aside from youth, other grassroots movements have arisen. In the UK and elsewhere, *Extinction Rebellion* brought together diverse age groups in high-profile nonviolent protests. Local citizen climate councils and Transition Town initiatives have tried to involve ordinary citizens in resilience projects. Farmers' alliances in France and Spain have begun to demand sustainable agriculture in response to drought fears. Trade unions in Germany and Sweden have debated green jobs to address worker anxiety over industrial changes. While not always explicitly framed as "climate anxiety," these movements reflect that environmental precarity spurs collective organization.

In sum, European grassroots activism shows how climate anxiety can be mobilized into social movements, particularly by youth demanding justice. These movements, in turn, influence national conversations. However, there are debates about inclusivity: some activists argue that mainstream climate protests are still dominated by certain demographics, and call for broader outreach to working-class and rural communities. The sociological implication is that to harness climate anxiety for progressive change, movements must be intersectional and address inequality head-on. As one youth researcher put it, climate action issues are becoming "more similar to issues such as unemployment or crime," which cut across classes

and require winning the trust of “loyal nationals” in all regions.

State Responses and Policy Interventions

European governments and institutions have begun to recognize the social dimensions of climate anxiety, but responses vary and often lag behind the problem. At the EU level, the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism explicitly aim to “leave no one behind” by providing funds to regions and citizens most affected by the transition. The new Social Climate Fund (starting 2026) is designed to help low-income households invest in energy-efficient solutions, addressing a key source of environmental precarity. These initiatives implicitly acknowledge inequality in climate burdens. However, as the EEA notes, policy implementation still often overlooks the most vulnerable: many adaptation measures reach the better-off more than the disadvantaged, unless equity is deliberately ensured. For example, urban greening projects may upgrade affluent neighborhoods faster, leaving poorer areas behind.

Specifically on climate anxiety and mental health, European policy is only beginning to respond. The EU’s Climate Adaptation Strategy and several national adaptation plans now mention vulnerable groups in a few paragraphs, but rarely allocate resources for addressing psychological distress or social exclusion. The European Commission’s 2023 communication on mental health emphasizes a cross-sector approach and acknowledges climate change as an emerging mental health issue, yet concrete policies remain scant. The EEA notes that existing political efforts on mental health (like the EU “Healthier Together” initiative) do not yet target climate-related distress. The Council of Europe’s Reykjavik Declaration (2023) touches on “climate emotions” and calls for support of youth in coping with eco-anxiety (Reykjavik Declaration, Council of Europe 2023). But systematic programs (e.g. school curricula, public health campaigns) to equip citizens with coping strategies are still rare.

At the national level, some countries have made ad-hoc moves. For instance, France and Belgium have held national surveys on youth eco-anxiety; UK school curricula now include climate education and UK mental health services have begun to train therapists on climate issues (Climate Psychology Alliance). Yet no European country has a comprehensive policy addressing climate anxiety as a social issue. Often, government responses focus on emissions targets and technological fixes, assuming public support rather than addressing the emotional fallout. This disconnect is critiqued by scholars: ignoring climate anxiety risks a legitimacy gap. Indeed, pervasive distrust in leaders to address climate (Hickman et al., 2021) shows that many Europeans tie climate anxiety to political action.

Where policy has integrated climate and social concerns, early evidence is promising. The EEA’s *Just Resilience* briefing highlights some examples of equity-oriented adaptation (e.g. flood management plans that prioritize low-income neighborhoods, heat-health action plans for the elderly). In youth policy, the Council of Europe recommends “resilience training” for youth workers and creation of safe community spaces to discuss climate issues. The European Year of Youth 2022 emphasized well-being alongside sustainability, and the European Youth Goals include climate education. These steps recognize that combating climate anxiety

requires social investment – in education, mental health services, and participatory governance.

Nonetheless, Europe's institutional response remains uneven. As [49] notes, policy silos persist: climate policies often sideline social justice, and social policies ignore climate stressors. The result is that communities facing the worst climate shocks still feel abandoned. Without stronger integration, climate anxiety will continue to feed political polarization (as seen in resistance to carbon taxes or green policies) and could undermine the broad public support needed for just transitions. A critical sociological view holds that state responses must not only mitigate physical risks but also validate people's fears through action. When governments treat climate anxiety as a legitimate political concern rather than a personal pathology, they open space for collective coping. Thus far, many European states have been reactive (e.g. emergency relief after disasters) rather than proactive in addressing climate fear.

Conclusion

In contemporary Europe, climate anxiety is a multifaceted social phenomenon. It emerges from the material risks of climate change and is filtered through social hierarchies. Wealth, education, and social status shape who feels most anxious about the climate – and who has the means to cope. As Norgaard (2011) insightfully notes, climate anxiety "mirrors broader patterns of social inequality" (p.28). Evidence from Europe confirms this: disadvantaged groups face more climate harm and psychological stress, while youth and women often articulate heightened anxiety and demands for justice. At the same time, middle-class youth and civil society have given anxiety a collective voice through activism.

Addressing climate anxiety therefore requires tackling its root causes in inequality. European societies must invest in equitable adaptation and support measures (improved housing, insurance, access to green spaces) so that the vulnerable feel protected. Mental health services and educational programs should incorporate climate awareness and coping strategies, especially for youth. Politically, acknowledging climate anxiety as legitimate is crucial: European governments should engage citizens – rich and poor, young and old – in fair climate solutions, ensuring that no group feels they are "left behind" by the transition. Only by linking climate policy with social justice can Europe transform anxiety into collective agency. In this way, climate anxiety can become not a paralyzing fear, but a political catalyst for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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