



ISRA HIRSI

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:  
A BLACK  
AND  
WHITE  
ISSUE?







“The fight  
of our  
generation.”



Illustrations by Gregory Harrison

#### AN URBAN UPBRINGING

Just 20 years old, Isra Hirsi is a Somali-American student at the forefront of the environmental justice movement. Daughter of U.S. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, Isra is no stranger to the pressures of being in the public eye. Despite her mother's close connection to politics, she carved her path independently and has been a powerful voice for both environmental and racial justice.

At 12, Hirsi participated in the protest for Jamar Clark, a 24-year-old black man killed by Minneapolis police. Hirsi was also inspired to campaign for climate change when she learned of the threat of drought in Somalia coupled with increasing air pollution in Minnesota, titling the crisis as ‘the fight of [her] generation’.

Raised in the inner city of

Minnesota, Isra felt detached from nature and worried that the effects of climate change would mean she'd never get to see her homeland, Somalia.

At just 14, she joined her high school environmental club and quickly noticed the lack of black representation within the environmental justice movement. Driven by this disparity, Isra decided it was time to disrupt these predominantly white spaces. Sick of being the token ‘black girl’, she used her identity as a source of empowerment.

“Since I was 5 years old, my parents taught me to fight for change but never forget where I come from.”

Within just two short years, she would go on to co-found the U.S. Youth Climate Strike. Isra's identity drives

her activism, and community has remained a motivation throughout her life. By her mother's side, she's hosted events at her local mosque to inspire other Muslims to participate in activism to end the alienation of marginalized groups within the climate movement. Her leadership has encouraged diversity and intersectionality in these spaces and will undoubtedly go on to inspire more change.





## A BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE?

There has always been racism in environmentalism. A classic example of this was when European settlers in the Americas drove the indigenous people out of their homelands. Colonialists believed that because the Native Americans' skin tone was darker than theirs and they spoke different languages, they were 'lesser'. The settlers spent decades pushing them further West, for the purpose of land ownership, hunting for sport, and consuming the land's resources for profit. The outcome, which is still prevalent today, was that Native Americans ended up being confined to small reservations in desolate lands.

Natural resources were slowly depleted and the big game populations of the country, such as bison and wolves, were nearly hunted to extinction. This is a phenomenon that was spread to all corners of the world as

**"It's important that those who are disproportionately affected by climate change be at the forefront of this issue."**



nearly every continent experienced some form of colonialism at a point in its history. The result – marginalised communities left with little.

In order for climate solutions to be reached, the people at the forefront of the climate movement must embrace the concept of *Intersectional Environmentalism*. This term was coined in 2020 by activist and author Leah Thomas who describes it as **"an inclusive form of environmentalism that advocates for both people and planet."**

Whereas the common approach to environmentalism focuses solely on justice for the planet and its resources, the intersectional approach advocates for social and environmental justice.

There is no justice for the planet if any person is left behind. Most notably, those marginalised communities that are at the forefront of climate change. The ugly truth is that these communities, the majority of which are in developing countries in the Global South, have actually contributed the least to the enhanced greenhouse effect. A 2020 study by Jason Hickel found that

**92% of all excess greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the Global North.**

The US caused 40% and the EU caused 29% of these. Intersectional Environmentalism calls for these drivers of climate change to be held liable for their actions.



Photo from @israhirsi on Instagram



Isra Hirsi (left) and her mother Ilhan Omar (right), source from Teen Vogue

## STRIKING FOR THE FUTURE

Inspired by the work of Greta Thunberg, Hirsi is leading the climate strike movement of America. At age 16, she co-founded the U.S. Youth Climate Strike (Y.C.S.) alongside fellow young campaigners Haven Coleman and Alexandria Villaseñor. Hirsi recognises that climate activism can be inaccessible for marginalised groups who do not have the privilege of skipping class or travelling. This motivates her to represent those who do not have the opportunity she has created.

Coinciding with the formation of the U.S. Y.C.S., Isra's mother became a congresswoman. As Hirsi helped to organise hundreds of climate strikes in the following months, her mother faced the pressures of being the first Somali-American Muslim in congress. The two faced increasing scrutiny from the public, including hate and threats online. Just one year after the founding of the US

Y.C.S., at age 17, Hirsi spoke in her TedTalk *The Angry Black Girl* about reclaiming her identity from the hate. She hopes to empower others and to speak up for those less fortunate than herself. With this determination and drive, she has been recognised with numerous awards.

**"You need dramatic action for dramatic change."**

These include the Brower Youth Award for her work on the U.S. Y.C.S., and the Voice of the Future Award which recognises emerging leaders.

Alongside her campaigning, she has created educational content in the hopes to empower the next generation of leaders. This includes her Adidas community course *Activism through Empathy* which launched in April 2023 which teaches skills like active listening. She has

also taken part in a YouTube series *The Outsiders*, in which she aims to tackle some "tough conversations but necessary ones" about what it means to be black.

Through her courses, campaigns and social media, Isra Hirsi has opened up important discussions about the racial discrimination embedded in the Climate Movement. She has also created room for people of colour in predominantly white spaces and helps to educate the public about intersectional environmentalism.

By leading with empathy, Isra has redefined what it is to be a young, environmental activist. Impatient for change, she demanded a space in the environmental justice movement, encouraging people to recognise.

**"You are important and your voice is too."**