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OVERVIEW

Women at the Forefront

One of the most urgent issues of our time, climate change is already impacting populations and ecosystems around the globe, threatening to set back development efforts by decades. But the impacts are not being felt equally.

Those with the fewest resources will be most susceptible to its negative effects—particularly women, the majority of the world’s poor. In many parts of the world, women still face unequal access to decision-making, formal financial systems, land ownership, reproductive health care, and education and information, undermining their well-being in addition to that of their families and communities.

At the same time, women’s vulnerability can obscure the fact that they are an untapped resource in efforts to cope with climate change and reduce the emissions that cause it.

As innovators, organizers, leaders, educators and caregivers, women are uniquely positioned to help curb the harmful consequences of a changing climate. Incorporating a gender perspective into climate change policies, projects and funds is crucial in ensuring

What is Climate Change?

Climate change means significant differences in weather patterns over an extended period of time.¹ Scientific consensus links current climate change primarily to emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from human activity (such as the burning of fossil fuels, loss of forests, and unsustainable production and consumption in the industrialized world).² The effects include higher global temperatures, an increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and related natural disasters, and severe impacts to the sustainability of ecosystems.

that women contribute to and benefit from equitable climate solutions.

Heightened Vulnerability

“We walk for long hours to find wood. Our wells are empty. Goods for sale are hard to find. Our land becomes idle. We don’t have money. It doesn’t rain the way it used to before.”
—Senegalese Woman on Climate Change³

Although women worldwide have made strides toward social equality and gaining rights, their socio-economic status remains lower than men’s. This makes them disproportionately vulnerable to environmental changes. Whether they live in developed or developing countries, poor and disadvantaged women are unequally affected by natural disasters and are overrepresented in death tolls;⁴ the discrepancy in death rates climbs along with the strength of the disaster.⁵

Weather Extremes and Women: Numbers Reveal Risk

- Women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters.⁶
- The 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh killed 140,000 people—the mortality rate of women over 40 was 31 per cent.⁷
- More than 70 per cent of the dead from the 2004 Asian tsunami were women.⁸
- Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans, USA, in 2005, predominantly affected African American women—already the region’s poorest, most marginalized community.
- An estimated 87 per cent of unmarried women and 100 per cent of married women lost their main source of income when Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwaddy Delta in Myanmar in 2008.⁹

Men and Gender Inequality

Gender inequalities and traditional roles don’t just affect women. In some cases men also directly suffer from their imposed gender roles. For example, more men than women died when Hurricane Mitch hit Central America in 1998 because of societal expectations that they should carry out high-risk rescue activities.¹¹ Communities lost lives unnecessarily and will therefore take much longer to recover. Men have specific vulnerabilities that affect their health and safety and that are linked to socialized gender roles, traditional norms and values, and the way in which prevailing ideas of masculinity are constructed.

“The gender inequalities that define [women’s] lives prior to a disaster are really what put them at such greatly increased risk after a disaster.”

— Kavita Ramdas, Global Fund for Women¹⁰

Population Perspective: Population dynamics, gender and climate change

The world’s population is forecast to grow from today’s 6.7 billion to between 8.0 and 10.5 billion by 2050. The majority of this growth is likely to be concentrated in areas and among populations—poor, urban and coastal—that are already highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Population growth typically means increased emissions. However, demographic factors such as household size, age structure of the population and urbanization also affect emissions patterns and energy use. Further, unsustainable consumption and per capita emissions are generally much higher in rich, industrialized countries. In this context, it’s important to remember that population is not just about numbers, it’s about people.

Many of the policies that affect population trends—such as more educational opportunities for girls, greater economic opportunities for women and expanded access to reproductive health and family planning—can also reduce vulnerability to climate change impacts and slow the growth of greenhouse gas emissions, helping to ensure adequate energy and sustainable development for all.¹²

Consequences of Climate Change

The differentiated impacts of climate change on women are numerous. An understanding of how climate change, sustainable development and population issues intersect—and the specific impacts on women—will help in the development of effective, gender-sensitive policies and programmes.

Issue	Impacts of Climate Change	Direct and Indirect Impacts on Women
Natural resources: food, water, fuel & land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought and/or flooding from temperature changes and erratic weather • Decreased soil fertility • Decreased crop yields or crop failure • Resource scarcity • Shortage of clean, potable water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased household work burden and time spent on gathering water, food and fuel such as firewood (sometimes leading to lower school enrolment rates, decreased literacy rates, or early marriage) • Increased hunger and calorie reduction for women • Exposure to contaminated water sources • In regions with restricted land rights, women potentially forced off/without access to fertile land • Loss of traditional land tenure
Natural disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warming oceans • Changing weather patterns/seasons • Erratic and more intense weather events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to education/information about weather • Restricted ability to respond (e.g., women often unable to leave house without male companion) • Lack of survival skills regularly taught to boys, such as swimming or tree climbing¹³ • Women regularly excluded from disaster recovery decision-making¹⁴
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in infectious, water-borne or vector-borne diseases, e.g., malaria, due to increased temperatures and intensified storms¹⁵ • Heat-related illness • Malnutrition • Increased air pollution, allergies and asthma • Mental disorders such as anxiety and depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnant and lactating women, along with the very young and very old, are most vulnerable to health threats • Increased lack of health-care services, immunizations, family planning, reproductive health care in disaster zones • Potential increase in maternal and infant mortality rates due to lack of care • Lack of services and hygienic supplies in relief shelters for pregnant, lactating or menstruating women
Population growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth expected in areas at risk to severe climatic changes and where people rely on natural resources for survival¹⁶ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition for increasingly scarce government and natural resources • Most vulnerable populations (e.g., women) continue to be under threat • High fertility rates impact women's health
Urbanization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural-to-urban migration increases due to environmental degradation, reduced productivity and conflict over resources • Informal shelters and communities expand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settlements—sometimes informal—may be unhealthy and dangerous, lack water and sanitation and be built on vulnerable land • Urban formal markets tend to benefit men • Poor urban women lack health services¹⁷ • Urban poverty projected to increase¹⁸
Migration & displacement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaster events can lead to displacement,¹⁹ temporary and permanent, internal and international • Environmental degradation and competition for resources prompts women and men to move • Forced migration due to regional vulnerability possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women comprise at least half of world migrant populations, but their needs are not prioritized in migration policies²⁰ • Women often lack resources to move, but post-disaster may lack resources to cope at home • Forced migration could exacerbate women's vulnerability and lack of access to resources and livelihood options
Household composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of/change in family composition due to migration/displacement and/or fatalities from natural disasters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise in female-headed households (FHH) • Limited resources for FHH in recovery/insurance programmes or funds that prioritize access for men • Lack of land rights jeopardizing women's food and livelihood security²¹ • Gendered divisions of labour reinforced • Decreased numbers of women in some households due to female disaster mortality
Conflict & violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition over limited resources can trigger conflict or displacement • Shortages in regular rainfall and overall scarcity of natural resources can increase civil war by 50 per cent²² • Increased anxiety and distress over livelihood insecurity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict amplifies existing gender inequalities • While men are more likely to be killed or injured in fighting, women suffer greatly from other consequences of conflict, such as rape, violence, anxiety and depression²³ • Higher levels of violence in the home and in post-disaster relief shelters

Catalysts of Change

In much of the world, women play a paramount role in the management, conservation and use of natural resources. Their primary responsibility for growing food and collecting water and fuelwood has made them keenly aware of their environments and the devastating impacts of deforestation, desertification and other forms of environmental degradation.²⁴

Women are sometimes seen only as victims of climate change and natural disasters, when in fact they are well positioned to be agents of change through mitigation, management and adaptive activities in their households, workplaces, communities and countries.

Women can be effective leaders within their community when it comes to addressing the harmful effects of climate change. Where women help devise early warning systems and reconstruction efforts, communities largely fare better when natural disaster hits.²⁵ Women's innovations have been heralded in sectors such as water, energy and reforestation—all of which are climate change issues. Their efforts must be incorporated into climate change policies and promoted through capacity building.

MALI^A

Women Leading the Way

In Mali, where 90 per cent of energy comes from burning wood and charcoal, rural women have developed sustainable alternatives to the wood trade. Cutting trees for fuel has contributed to widespread deforestation and desertification, and subsequent soil erosion and erratic flooding further impacts agriculture and infrastructure. To reduce dependence on wood, the Sinsibere Project has been educating women about alternative livelihood activities and engaging them in micro-lending programmes, literacy and mathematics training. Since the Project's implementation in 2001, 80 per cent of the women have stopped or significantly reduced wood usage. The women have taught their families about preserving the environment, and their increased income allows them to send their children to school.

Source: www.malifolkcenter.org/ and International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)

BRAZIL

Women as Managers of the Environment

In Pintadas, a district in the poorest region of Brazil, people rely primarily on agriculture for their livelihoods. Yet, with no dependable irrigation system and a scarcity of water, tackling poverty is a challenge. To address these problems, a collaborative partnership of organizations^B developed a small-scale irrigation project piloted by the SouthSouthNorth network.²⁶ The project was designed to help women and men work together to learn better water management and irrigation techniques harnessing solar power. Through the Association of Women of Pintadas, a woman was selected to spearhead the initiative, changing the face of decision-making. Today, women are empowered by the technical know-how to manage and adapt new agricultural systems. Both women and men in Pintadas are better able to deal with climate change and drought, while food security, water management and income generation have improved.

Source: www.pintadas-solar.org and ISDR

INDIA

Women Against Environmental Destruction

The Dasholi Gram Samaj Mandal women-led environmental movement in India, which began as a protest against deforestation, has been successfully protecting and managing the environment for 32 years. Many village women depend on the local forest for essential needs like water, fodder and firewood, all of which are threatened by climate change and natural disasters. Establishing that natural resource conservation was a matter for community concern, the women involved men as partners. The women's initiative resulted in reduced damage from floods and landslides, extensive reforestation and less drudgery for the women. The movement has also challenged government policies and traditional assumptions about gender roles, as women effectively demonstrate their leadership abilities and improve the sustainability of their environment.

Source: ISDR

^A Mali, Brazil and India case studies from, "Gender Perspectives: Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction into Climate Change Adaptation: Good Practices and Lessons Learned" (2008). Geneva: International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).

^B REDEH—Network for Human Development, Rio de Janeiro (www.redeh.org.br); Centro Clima, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (www.centroclima.org.br); Municipality of Pintadas, state of Bahia (www.pintadas.ba.gov.br/index.asp); Federal Environment Agency of Germany (www.uba.de); SEED Initiative (www.seedinit.org); Secretary of Science and Technology, state of Bahia (www.secti.ba.gov.br); and technology partners.

Equality in Climate Change Policy

While gender equality is widely recognized as a prerequisite for sustainable development and as central to global initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),^c a gender perspective is, so far, missing from climate change policy.

In the critical negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—the overall framework for intergovernmental efforts to tackle the challenge posed by climate change, ratified by 193 countries as of August 26, 2009—many Parties and gender advocates alike are working to secure a place for gender in the new global commitments, funds and projects. At the national and local levels, decision-making and implementation of policies and programmes must respond to vulnerabilities and capitalize on capacities of both women and men.

Some key points for policy advocacy include:

- Prevent challenging and costly adaptation through commitments to mitigation.
- Prioritize adaptation activities, particularly for vulnerable communities including women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and indigenous peoples.
- Increase investments in mitigation and adaptation and base them on gender analysis. Investing in voluntary family planning and reproductive health access will empower women, lower fertility rates, improve maternal and child health and slow population growth—all of which will help mitigate climate change and build more resilient, adaptive communities.
- Incorporate gender and population issues into National Adaptation Programmes of Action and climate policies to effectively meet the goals.

What You Can Do

1 Stay involved: Visit any of these websites for more information on women and climate change and how to take action:

WEDO: www.wedo.org

UNFPA: www.unfpa.org

GGCA: www.gender-climate.org

ENERGIA: www.energia.org

GenderCC: www.gendercc.net

Women in Europe for a Common Future:
www.wecf.eu

Gender and Disaster Network:
www.gdonline.org

Gender and Water Alliance: www.genderandwater.org

2 Learn about climate change and the global policy framework: www.unfccc.int

3 Find out about your country's plans and commitments:

http://unfccc.int/national_reports/items/1408.php

4 Join the movement: Talk to your organization about incorporating gender and climate change issues into your current programmes and activities.

5 Take action: Contact your policy makers to see what they're doing about climate change, and review the rest of this Resource Kit for recommendations.

^c The eight MDGs are: end poverty and hunger; universal education; gender equality; child health; maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS; environmental sustainability; and global partnership.

Major Terms

Adaptation—“Actions by individuals or systems to avoid, withstand, or take advantage of current and projected climate changes and impacts.” Decreasing vulnerability or increasing resilience to impacts.²⁷

Greenhouse Gases—“Greenhouse gases absorb infrared radiation and trap the heat in the atmosphere. ... [causing] an increase in the average surface temperature of the Earth over time.”²⁸

Mitigation—“Any attempt to reduce the rate at which greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere.”²⁹

Sustainable Development—“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”³⁰

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Climate Change Connections

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