

Easy Digest: The Links between Climate Change & Gender



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Summary

- Climate change affects everyone, but it does impact women and girls in unique ways, which are evident in their health, education and livelihoods.
- Fostering gender equality has positive outcomes for development and for climate change.
- Funders can commit resources to fund initiatives that promote gender equality alongside climate impact, as mutually reinforcing objectives.

Climate Change Impacts Women and Girls in Unique Ways

- **Climate change affects everyone, but its impacts are not felt equally by all [1].** The connection between climate and gender means that women and girls – and especially the more vulnerable – disproportionately suffer the impacts of climate change in comparison to their male counterparts. This is due to the existing gender inequalities across societies that mean that men and women are treated differently. These climate impacts are further exacerbated by overlapping forms of discrimination stemming from race, ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.





Photo: Asian Development Bank 2010

- **Historically and still to this day, many societies are governed by structures where power is held by men.** These structures reinforce unjust beliefs about the roles, capabilities and agency of women and lead to men and women suffering different experiences in family life, work, within culture and across economic and political spaces [2]. As a result, in many societies, women have less control of resources, are in fewer positions of decision-making authority and have less agency compared to their male counterparts. Women are more likely than men to be in informal work (with little or no job and social security protection) and take up the majority of unpaid work, including domestic responsibilities like cooking and sourcing water, to caring for the young and elderly [3]. Because of these deeply embedded inequalities between men and women, climate change impacts women in unique ways.

The Impacts of Climate Change on Women and Girls

The unique impacts of climate change on women and girls as compared to their male counterparts - simply because of their gender - are noticeable in the areas of health, education and livelihoods [4]. The consequences of climate change pose a significant threat to decades of development progress in these areas. For example, while progress was made in areas such as reducing rates of child marriage and increasing rates of girls completing secondary education [5] over recent years, the impact of these global crises may have reversed some gains [6].

Health

- **Women face an unequal burden of health risks exacerbated by climate change, due to both biological differences and due women's roles in society [7].** Of 130 climate and health studies analysed by Carbon Brief, 68% of them found that women were more affected by climate-related impacts on health than men [8]. This included areas like death and injury from extreme weather; food insecurity; infectious disease; mental illness; and poor reproductive and maternal health. Furthermore, when climate impacts (like extreme heat) strike, women bear the burden of caring for family members who are unwell, in addition to looking after their own health.



Photo: Avijit Ghosh / Climate Visuals

- **In some spaces, women earn a living doing work that exposes them to negative health impacts that are made worse by climate change.** For example, 73.6% of women in sub-Saharan Africa and 62.3% of women in Asia are employed in roles that are outdoors like farming, at higher rates than men [9]. Indeed, women make up 48% of the global agricultural workforce. With this work, women are more likely to be exposed to air pollution and the impacts of heat stress on health.
- **Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts.** Research has shown that heat increases the incidence of stillbirth. In addition, warming temperatures and increased flooding encourage the spread of mosquitos and therefore illnesses such as Zika virus, which is linked to worse maternal and neonatal outcomes including severe birth defects. Climate-related disasters can be particularly dangerous for pregnant women. During the 2022 floods in Pakistan, an estimated 650,000 pregnant women in affected areas lacked access to vital maternal health support after more than 1,500 health facilities and road infrastructure were destroyed. For women who find themselves displaced whilst pregnant, who may not have identification documents or face language differences, the obstacles to access are even greater.

Education & Livelihoods

The majority of people living in extreme poverty globally are women and girls and climate change creates further barriers and disruption to their education and livelihood opportunities.

- **Climate change impacts can lead to financial hardship, forcing families to make survival decisions that put girls' access to education at risk.** For example, when extreme weather affects crop yields and the livelihoods of rural, family farmers, it is the girls who are at higher risk of dropping out of school to spend more time working in the field to make up for the losses [10]. In many places, the task of collecting water falls on women and girls and in areas experiencing severe drought this means walking longer distances each day in search of water, and further jeopardising their ability to attend school [11].
- **Climate change impacts - and the impacts of poverty - have also been linked with forcing families to turn to cultural practices that push girls further away from education.** In particular, there is a link between increased drought and flooding and increased child marriages. Furthermore, girls from households that derive their income from activities that will be hard hit by climate change – like agriculture – are at greater risk of having their education disrupted by climate impacts.

- **Women are more likely to work in the sectors that are most vulnerable to climate change, such as agriculture and tourism [12].** Within agriculture, women are more likely to work in subsistence farming or on small farms that are especially vulnerable to climate change impacts like droughts, floods, and pests. Women smallholder farmers are less likely to have access to resources that could improve their yields, such as drought-tolerant seeds or equipment, so they are not accessing climate adaptation opportunities [13]. In addition, issues around land ownership and in some cases, discriminatory laws or customs which prohibit women from owning their land, further jeopardise women's economic security in the face of climate threats. Similar to the agricultural sector, women make up 54% of the global tourism workforce which is a sector at high risk of job losses and income declines in the face of climate threats [14]. Notably, within the industry, women are more likely to be employed in lower-paid, insecure positions such as cleaners and tour guides. As the impacts of climate change worsen, women workers may face greater challenges around pay and earning a living, leading to increased poverty and further exacerbating gender inequality.

Additional considerations

- **Some women and girls are dealing with multiple, overlapping drivers of inequality - in addition to their gender.** Women and girls with disabilities or who are from marginalised groups - for example Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), or older and migrant women may be even more affected by climate impacts because of the intersections of discrimination that they live in. Therefore, intersectionality is an important tool to fully understand the gendered impacts of climate change [15].
- **There are some instances where men face greater risks from climate impacts than women.** For example, men are more at risk from infectious disease as shown in Côte d'Ivoire because they are more likely to work in occupations which involve frequent contact with freshwater and an increased exposure to the parasite's larvae, such as fishing [16]. Studies from Bangladesh found that men are more likely than women to die in floods [17]. A range of factors are cited to explain this outcome, including societal expectations of men to attempt to rescue others, as well as greater alcohol use. However, it is still the case that women face impacts of climate change that are exacerbated by entrenched and systemic ideas about their lesser roles, status and agency in society.



Gender Equality Gives Rise to Positive Climate Impacts

Addressing the specific climate impacts on women and girls is imperative for their health, education and livelihoods outcomes. At the same time, improvements in gender equality can also have a positive impact on climate change. Women who are empowered can become leaders in the green transition, for example practising climate-smart agriculture or installing renewable energy, and they can play an important role in their communities, helping others prepare and respond to climate-related disasters [18].

- **Investing in girl's and women's education and employment opportunities will deliver multiple returns for the climate, economy and society as a whole.** For example, a 2019 study from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that if women smallholders had equal access to resources and equipment as their male counterparts, farm yields would rise by 20-30%, hunger for 100 to 150 million people would be alleviated and there would be 2.1 gigatons of CO₂ reduction by 2050 [19].
- **Currently women make up only 32% [20] of the renewable energy workforce, but the demand for skills and labour to fill these types of 'green jobs' is expected to rise,** particularly with the increase in demand for small-scale renewable businesses which can be more accessible to women [21]. Therefore, the transition to a low-carbon economy presents an opportunity to restructure the labour market in a more inclusive and equitable way, including better financing for women entrepreneurs.
- **Applying a gender lens to climate action by intentionally prioritising gender equality and women's empowerment as part of development projects can help us to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as tackling poverty and hunger.** A study by the United Nations Development Programme found that for every 1% increase in the proportion of women in paid employment, there is a 0.7% reduction in national poverty rates [22]. This reduction in poverty is likely to have a positive correlation with increased climate resilience [23]. Doing this type of work well requires an investment in the capacity of individuals or organisations that are rooted in communities most at risk from climate change, for example grassroots women leaders, as well as taking a trust-based approach that prioritises relationship-building and learning.



Conclusion

The effects of human-made climate change have significant and specific implications for women and girls globally. Knowledge about the impacts of climate change on women and girls is vital to delivering adequate responses, including climate adaptation policy and programming [24].

What does this mean for climate philanthropy?

Philanthropic funders seeking to make an impact in this area have a unique role to play in shaping the trajectory of our collective response, by applying a climate and intersectional lens to funding, programmes and practice, and centring communities as solution holders.

- **Climate philanthropy should prioritise gender-responsive strategies**, recognising the unique vulnerabilities and capabilities of women and girls in the context of climate change. This entails funding initiatives that not only combat climate change but also promote gender equality.
- **Supporting grassroots organisations led by women and indigenous groups** will help to channel resources to those with an intimate understanding of climate related challenges and solutions in a local context.
- **Funding should also focus on capacity building of women-led organizations and initiatives**, providing them with the tools, knowledge, and resources to lead climate action and build resilience effectively.
- **Climate philanthropy must also advocate for policies that acknowledge and address the gendered dimensions of climate change**, either directly or by providing resources to those advocating for policy of this nature.
- **A collaborative approach is essential**. Philanthropy can foster cooperation between governments, NGOs, the private sector, and communities, ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into broader climate change discussions and actions.

Beyond funding, organisations can leverage their networks and platforms to amplify the voices of women and girls, engendering inclusive policies that can build an equitable and resilient future for all.

Written by
Impatience Earth



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