

# Changing the Climate:

## Why Women's Perspectives Matter!

### Climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our time

**E**xtrême weather and natural disasters are more common and the results are all too real: devastating drought and floods in Africa and Asia, a deadly European heat wave, and the wreckage of hurricanes in the Americas. Despite increased media coverage and public awareness many governments have yet to act.

Unquestionably, climate change will affect everyone. But women are the most vulnerable and the best poised to curb the effects of climate change. Yet, they have remained invisible in these efforts. Governments' main tools for tackling climate change—mitigation measures to slow down global warming and adaptation measures to decrease the consequences—are not yet reaching the most affected populations, particularly women.

In every society, women and men have distinct responsibilities, knowledge and needs which are essential to addressing the effects of climate change. Climate change magnifies existing inequalities and gender inequality is among the most pervasive. Women's historic disadvantages—their restricted access to resources and information and their limited power in decision-making—make them most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

#### Climate Change Amplifies Inequality

As the majority of the world's poor, women are disproportionately affected by swift environmental changes. This is true even in industrialized countries. In the US, Hurricane Katrina entrenched poor African-American women, already the most impoverished group

in the nation, in deeper levels of poverty. Poor women living in developing countries face even greater obstacles.

Climate Change has made access to basic needs and natural resources a challenge. And natural disasters often reinforce traditional gender roles. Rural women in developing countries are still largely responsible for securing food, water, and energy for cooking and heating. Drought, deforestation, and erratic rainfall cause women to work harder to secure these resources. Women, therefore, have less time to earn income, get an education, or provide care to families. Girls regularly drop out of school to help their mothers gather fuel wood and water.

In nearly all societies, women still have unequal access to information and capital and less power to make decisions. During natural disasters, often more women die than men because they aren't warned, can't swim or can't leave the house alone. Women usually have fewer assets than men to recover from natural disasters, and they often don't own land that can be sold to secure income in an emergency. They can not even secure any credit from Financial Institutions as they do not have security to that credit. Women also make up the majority of the world's agricultural laborers and rely heavily on fertile land and regular rainfall.

#### Climate Change Fuels Conflict

A shortage of natural resources can lead to conflict, and conflict amplifies existing gender inequalities. Shortfalls in seasonal rains have resulted in drought and economic distress that lead to a 50% increase in the likelihood of civil war. While men are more likely to be killed or injured in fighting, women suffer greatly from the indirect consequences of conflict.



*African women and girls walk for large distances to look for firewood and water.*

In the Darfur region of Sudan, where desertification has plagued the land in recent decades, homes are often destroyed, campaigns of intimidation, rape or abduction are waged, and thousands of women and children are caught in the crossfire. The vast majority of the world's refugees are women and children. The effects of climate change are multifaceted: social, political, and economic as well as environmental. By recognizing that women are key agents of environmental transformation, we also counter the gender inequalities that render climate change so devastating to women.

### **Women: Untapped Resources**

Another consequence of gender inequality is that women are often perceived primarily as victims and not as positive agents of change. However, women can be key agents of adaptation to climate change. Their responsibilities in households, communities and as stewards of natural resources position them well to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities. For example, we have seen time and again that communities fare better during natural disasters when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction. Women tend to share information related to community well being, choose less polluting energy sources, and adapt more easily to environmental changes when their family's survival is at stake.

“Women must be at the heart of relief efforts and the re-building of shattered communities. . .”  
Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Global climate change negotiation—including the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol are narrowly focused on emissions reductions, rather than social impacts. Even the latest UN research from the report on climate change completely omits social or gender concerns. To date, four out of the fourteen National Adaptation Plans of Action that have been submitted to the global climate change convention specifically mention the importance of gender equality. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out global benchmarks on gender equality, poverty eradication, and environmental sustainability, although national reports have so far neglected to seriously address the linkages between these areas. And a recent UNEP survey of environment ministries found only 2 countries engaged in climate change activities that incorporated a gender perspective.

### **What can be Done?**

The connection between gender equality and sustainable development isn't new: in fact, every major global agreement on sustainable development acknowledges the importance of gender equality. National level action is especially important and government agencies and other stakeholders should ensure that gender equality is at the forefront of climate change initiatives by:

- Undertaking a gender analysis of national or local climate change policies, programs and/or budgets. For example, examine how national adaptation or other climate change plans include or exclude gender equality.
- Ensuring that women participate in decisions related to climate change and have access to capacity building. For example, enhance opportunities for participation, education, and training.
- Developing gender-sensitive indicators for governments to use in national reports to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).
- Creating practical tools that allow gender equality to be incorporated in climate change initiatives. For example, develop a mechanism for the CDM to fund projects that make renewable energy technologies more available to women.

### **Resources for Action**

To learn more about the linkages between climate change and gender equality and what needs to be done:

[www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org)