



Women's  
Environmental  
Network

WEN is the only UK Charity working on issues that link women, health and the environment.

# Why women and climate change?

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*This briefing looks at why climate change is a gender issue. When connecting gender and climate change, it is important to understand that climate change magnifies the nature of human vulnerability and gender inequality. The impact of climate change on some parts of the population is greater, specifically for the populace who are most dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods and least able to respond to natural hazards.*

Although climate change will have an impact on everyone on the planet, women will be affected differently, and more acutely, than men. Globally, women are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to their different and unequal social roles and status. In a nutshell, women contribute less to climate change, are impacted more by it, and have less say in decisions about the problem.

Women's Environmental Network (WEN) is campaigning for gender and climate justice.

### Demographics

Gender and climate justice are crucial because women and children are 14 times more likely to die or be injured during a natural disaster than men. Though mortality rates vary depending on the country and the type of disaster, the share of women's deaths could go up to 79 per cent, due to less access to information, lack of skills, such as swimming, or constrained mobility outside their home. Of the 26 million people currently estimated to be displaced by climate change, 20 million are women. It is estimated that this number could rise to 200 million people by 2050.

Women make up 60 per cent of the global poor, and overwhelmingly carry the burden of child care and domestic tasks. Biology makes women more vulnerable to certain risks during particular periods of their lives, such as pregnancy and old age, which climate change could further exacerbate. In developing countries women produce between 45 to 80 per cent of the food. In developing countries, 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force are women, however, globally, seven out of ten farmers are women, mainly growing food for household consumption. Women worldwide hold title to less than 2 per cent of private land. In the UK, 17 per cent of the agricultural workforce is female.



## Climate change impacts

*Climate disasters hit women hardest...*

..especially in countries that do not have equal rights policies in their legal systems. Climate change is likely to increase the intensity of extreme weather events, such as tropical storms and droughts, which often particularly affect women. For example, the Bangladesh cyclone in 1991 killed 140,000 people, and almost five times more young women than men died. This was largely due to the fact that women in the area could not swim, had restricted mobility because of their clothing, and many left their homes too late because they waited for a male relative to accompany them. Men were able to warn each other of the danger when they met in public spaces, but some were not able to get the information back to their families.

*“climate change will impact women disproportionately, yet very often mitigation and adaptation policies fail to include a gender perspective..”*

In the European heat wave of 2003, 75 per cent more women died than men, due to factors including poverty, deprivation, living alone, vulnerability to associated air pollution, and the increased difficulty that women over the age of 50 have in regulating their internal temperature, making them more vulnerable to dehydration. A study of disasters in 141 countries found that where women had equal rights, there was little or no difference in the number of women and men that died. Where women's rights were compromised, female mortality was higher.

According to the UN, in the aftermath of a disaster, women tend to have less access to work and to having a say in the decision-making process of recovery efforts and risk reduction. As research suggests, climate change will impact women disproportionately, yet very often mitigation and adaptation policies fail to include a gender perspective.

## Food, water and fuel shortages impact women's everyday lives

Climate change also affects people's daily lives. About half of the population in developing countries experience increased water scarcity linked to climate change, which results in women having to travel greater distances to collect water and fuel, and means that children, predominantly girls, are increasingly kept out of education to help with the often exhausting task of supporting the home. Women are also more exposed to indoor pollutants from the use of firewood and other solid fuels used for cooking. A lack of access to clean water impacts women's and girls' menstrual health as well making them more prone to infections.

Climate change is likely to affect farming, with reduced harvests increasing food prices, which affect the poorest households, often headed by women, most acutely. When there is a global food price increase, such as in 2007, poor households in developed countries such as the UK are also affected.

## Climate change worsens health inequalities

The Department of Health identifies a number of negative health effects that are likely to be worsened by climate change, including heat related deaths, respiratory allergies and mental health problems caused by flooding. Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene may result in more female than male deaths. Those living in poverty already suffer from health inequalities and a disproportionate number of women are particularly vulnerable to these problems. In developing countries, health inequalities suffered by

women are likely to be exacerbated as climate change increases physical and mental stress, and the risks of diseases such as malaria and dengue. Responsibilities linked to caring for family members often fall to women, meaning that the ill health of others can also impact them.

## Many biofuels and carbon offsetting schemes deprive women of land, water and food

Recent years have seen various "solutions" proposed to tackle climate change. Unfortunately, many of them have impacted negatively on the poor, particularly women and indigenous people, whilst allowing the current economic system to continue. For example, biofuels have been supported in the EU and US as a replacement for oil, with the result of displacing food production and pushing up food prices. The Food and Agriculture Organisation has found that women in particular are adversely affected by large-scale biofuel production. This is because of the competition for marginal land, which is often used by women for household food production; high water consumption of biofuel crops, which compete directly with household needs and increase women's workload; land property and access to assets, as men usually have the formal ownership of the land; and exploitation of female biofuel plantation workers. Other projects are designed to offset the emissions produced by consumers or businesses in the developed world by reducing or sequestering carbon emissions. Economic gains rarely fund the small projects most likely to be run by and benefiting women. Initiatives such as forestry projects that enclose previously communal land tend to affect women most because they are often dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods.

## Women at the grassroots

Women are more likely than men to be involved in community-based projects to tackle climate change, such as local food projects. Almost twice as many female volunteers as male were trained by the UK government initiative 'Every Action Counts' to support local community organisations to take actions to reduce their environmental impact.

*"Women are more likely than men to be involved in community-based projects to tackle climate change..."*

Women make up over 80 per cent of consumer decisions and are more likely to be sustainable consumers, with a higher propensity to make lifestyle changes such as recycling, reducing meat consumption or choosing a more sustainable energy supplier. For example, a 2016 study of 10,000 people across the UK found that almost twice as many vegans identify as female (63%) than male (37%).

In households across the UK, women are fundamental to reducing carbon emissions since around 15 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions in 2014 were generated from household activities. Carbon dioxide accounts for the majority of UK greenhouse gas emissions (82% in 2013). As agents of change, women can and do ensure that tasks such as recycling are enacted, and energy used efficiently. As consumers, they are often responsible for purchasing most of the food and other items such as clothing and household goods, all of which contribute to a household's emissions.

## Key points

### Why women?

- Women are more likely to suffer from an increased workload as a result of climate change-related disasters, e.g. increased burden of water and fuel collection
- Women are more likely to experience loss of income and health problems in the aftermath of climate change related disasters
- Women are more likely to suffer violence, including sexual violence, in resource conflicts exacerbated by climate change
- Women are more likely to be the first to suffer during food shortages as a result of climate change

### Climate justice

- Women contribute less to climate change than men
- Women have less say in decisions about the problem due to being under-represented in climate change related political and business decision-making
- Women tend to champion pro-environmental behaviour change and education over technological solutions

# Women's role in tackling climate change

*While women are often key decision-makers at a household level and often lead in community based activity, they remain under-represented at a national and international level.*

## Women making national decisions

Currently, only 29.4 per cent of UK MPs are female. Only 18 per cent of appointed ministers are women and they are usually assigned to portfolios related to social issues. Only one in five members of lower or single houses of parliament worldwide are women. Lower female representation is often associated with developing economies. However, in Europe in 2014, women were underrepresented among the ministries of environment, climate change, energy, and transport; the average proportion of women was 28 per cent. This lack of female representation means that it is less likely that women's interests will be adequately taken into account during decision making.

Women are often relegated from decision making processes at the local level, especially in the management of natural resources. According to 'UN Women', this may be due to inequalities in gender roles, meaning women face time constraints, unequal domestic work burdens, lack of information, lack of support from men, and even threats of punishment and/or violence.

There is also evidence that developed countries with higher levels of female political representation have been most successful in reducing their carbon dioxide emissions, suggesting that an improved gender balance, as well as furthering gender equality, could also help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.



## Gender, COP21 and the Paris Agreement

The 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris in 2015 achieved a very important goal: a universal, legally binding agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions whereby 195 countries worked together to adopt the first universal climate agreement. However, strong gender references are still missing and with the US Trump administration threatening to withdraw from the Agreement, its future is far from secured. Women's access to and influence in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations also has some way to go before reaching gender parity. The UNFCCC failed to address gender equality as integral to its work on climate change until it adopted the 2014 Lima Programme for Action on Women which sought to increase women's participation in the decision-making process of the Convention, and at the national and sub-national levels. This progress is thanks to actions on the part of women's groups internationally, which called for gender equality to be

fundamental to the work of the UNFCCC in Bali in 2007. However, the path is not smooth and the number of women in UNFCCC delegations has in some cases dropped during the last four years. Indeed, at COP 21 in 2015 in Paris, one year on from the promising developments at Lima, only 32 per cent of delegates were women, representing a decrease of 4 per cent.

## Gender and the REDD+ Framework

Part of the UN process adopted in Kyoto to support mitigation actions for climate change is the REDD agreement (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which aims to fund and prioritise policies for the sustainable management of forests around the world. The gender and development organisations led by the IUCN at Copenhagen lobbied successfully to have a new policy, REDD+, accepted in 2011. The REDD+ agreement was the only gender related agreement mentioned in the Copenhagen Accord.

Since then, the implementation of the REDD+ mechanism has been problematic. According to research, women appear to have little or no information about programmes implemented under REDD+. In 2015, the safeguards of the framework were finally approved, but even if they acknowledge and promote women's participation, more gender integration into the design, monitoring and evaluation of REDD+ projects is still needed.

*“Often ‘gender’ is seen as synonymous with ‘women’, as an opportunity for men to leave the room and talk about something else. But it is gender in the form of hyper-masculinity (whether practiced by men or women) which develops carbon extensive technologies, widespread extraction of irreplaceable resources, and uncontrolled consumption and waste which pollutes our environment and kills our non-human partners on Planet Earth.”*

Susan Buckingham in *What's Gender got to do with Climate Change? – Everything!*



## Women's Environmental Network

WEN's vision is of an environmentally sustainable world in which we have achieved gender equality.

### Membership:

Standard - £24  
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## What change is needed?

*Everyone must play their part in the follow-up to Paris to ensure the ratification of the Agreement and the pre-2020 actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep warming 'Well Below 2 Degrees Celsius'. There has been progress in addressing gender inequalities, but there is still more to do. In the Paris Agreement gender is mentioned in the Preamble, Adaptation, and Capacity Building sections. However, despite all efforts, gender-specific measures have been left out of vital parts of the agreement such as Finance.*

It is important for the UK's negotiation team to keep pushing for more gender awareness over the coming years, before the Agreement enters into force. Advocating for a more active female presence would mean that more gender-specific issues will be on the agenda.

Further action is required on three fronts:

- 1) *Gender-sensitive strategies to mitigate climate change* – the more radical the cuts in emissions made over the next few years, the better chance there is of limiting the negative effects of climate change on women.
- 2) *Addressing gender inequality* – until gender inequality is addressed, women will continue to suffer climate injustice.
- 3) *Gender-sensitive strategies for adapting to climate change* – it is vital that adaptation strategies adequately take account of women's considerations and help to empower them.

*“Advocating for a more active female presence would mean that more gender specific issues will be on the agenda.”*

### Gender Policy

*In order to ensure gender and climate change issues are acted upon and to reduce gender inequality, it is important to introduce policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 80 per cent by 2050. This can be achieved by:*

- Improving household energy efficiency, investing in walking and cycling, and ensuring efficient, affordable and safe public transport.
- Supporting environmental education and pro-environmental behaviour change, often favoured and championed by women.
- Pursuing technological solutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

In light of the Paris Agreement, it is important to focus on divesting from fossil fuels. This represents an opportunity for businesses and the government to ensure a smooth transition towards renewables.

### Addressing gender inequalities

Initiatives could include reducing the disproportionate number of women living in poverty; replacing policies that reinforce gendered roles, such as the disparity between maternity and paternity leave; improving the work-life balance through policy and regulation; and improving gender equality in political and business spheres, as in some Scandinavian countries. The UK's overseas development assistance must also ensure that women and girls are not disadvantaged, and provision should be made to assist developing-country governments in progressing towards gender equality as appropriate.

## What you can do

- Visit or write to your MP to raise these issues and ask them to write to the Secretary of State about it. Demand gender-sensitive climate strategies from all political parties.
- Sign up to WEN climate change updates, the WEN blog and newsletter, and follow WEN on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
- Send us your articles, news, photos and green tips for inclusion in our quarterly e-newsletter.
- Download our Gender and Climate Change Agenda report – [www.wen.org.uk](http://www.wen.org.uk)
- Be part of the network: join WEN and get in touch with your WEN local contact or group.
- Use your consumer power – only buy things you really need, boycott damaging products and services, demand greener products, and support businesses that are committed to sustainable and fair trade principles.
- Get involved in local politics or community groups to encourage sustainability and gender equality in your local area: examples include WEN local groups, the Transition Town movement, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth.
- Join the Climate Coalition: <http://www.theclimatecoalition.org/>
- Join UKFeminista and the Fawcett Society.
- Spread the word – talk to others and make your voice heard. Organise film screenings to highlight climate and gender issues.
- Raise climate and green issues at your work place, and/ or your children or grandchildren's school or nursery.
- Be an example to others through your lifestyle choices, e.g. grow some of your own fruit and veg, use public transport, walk or cycle, switch to a renewable energy supplier, turn off equipment/lights usually left on standby, reduce the amount of water use in the home.
- For more information, check out the Friends of the Earth book 'Why Women will Save the Planet', available at FoE Shop <http://www.foeshop.co.uk/why-women-will-save-the-planet.html>
- Join WEN!