



Women's
Environmental
Network

Briefing

Why women and climate change?

This briefing looks at why climate change is a gender issue. 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 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. WEN is campaigning for gender and climate justice.

Gender and climate justice are crucial because more than 10,000 women are dying each year from weather related disasters already, while there are about 4,500 male deaths. Of the 26 million people currently estimated to be displaced by climate change, 20 million are women.

Women make up 70 per cent of the global poor, and overwhelmingly carry the burden of child care and domestic tasks. Biology makes women more vulnerable to certain problems, and at particular times of their lives, such as pregnancy and old age, which climate change could further exacerbate. Globally, seven out of ten farmers are women, mainly growing food for household consumption yet women worldwide hold title to less than two per cent of private land.



WEN Local food growing

This briefing looks at how climate change affects women, women's contribution to climate change, and women's role in tackling climate change. The final section looks at what can be done – by each of us, and by those in power.

This helps to explain why:

- Women are more likely to suffer from an increased workload as a result of climate change-related disasters, eg 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

However:

- Women contribute less to climate change than men
- Have less say in decisions about the problem due to being under-represented in political and business decision-making on the subject
- Female consumers are more likely than men to consider the environmental impact of purchasing decisions
- Women tend to champion pro-environmental behaviour change and education over technological solutions
- Women in developing countries feeling the effects of climate change have been identified as particularly adaptive and innovative

Climate change impacts

Climate disasters hit women hardest

Especially in countries without equal rights. 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, in the Bangladesh cyclone in 1991, almost five times more young women than men died. This was largely because women couldn't swim, had restricted mobility because of their clothing, and many women 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 as they met in public spaces, but didn't always get the information back to their families.

In the European heat wave in 2003, 75% more women died than men, with factors including poverty, deprivation, living alone, vulnerability to associated air pollution, and the increased difficulty that women over the age of 60 have in regulating their internal temperature, and so becoming 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, but where women's rights were compromised, female mortality was higher.

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

Climate change is also affecting people's daily lives. In many developing countries, increased water scarcity linked to climate change is increasing the distance women must travel to collect water and fuel, and means that children, usually girls, are increasingly being kept out of education to help with the often exhausting task.

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 are global food price rises, as in 2007, poor households in developed countries such as the UK are also affected.

Women at the grassroots

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

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. Those living in poverty, already suffer from health inequalities and include a disproportionate number of women, are likely to be particularly vulnerable to these problems. In developing countries, health inequalities suffered by women are likely to be exacerbated as climate change increases risks from diseases such as malaria and dengue, and physical and mental stress. Because caring responsibilities for other family members often fall to women, the ill health of others can also impact on women.

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

Recent years have seen various "solutions" proposed to the problem of 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 Organization has found that women in particular are adversely affected by large-scale biofuel production, 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; 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 of benefit to 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.

At home

In households across the UK, women are fundamental since around 27% of carbon dioxide emissions are generated from household activities. As "change agents", women can and do ensure that tasks such as recycling are done, and energy is used efficiently. As consumers, they are often responsible for the purchase of most of the food and other items such as clothing and household goods, all of which contribute to a household's emissions.

Women's contribution to climate change

There is evidence that women tend to contribute less to climate change than men. This is for a number of reasons.

More women than men live in poverty

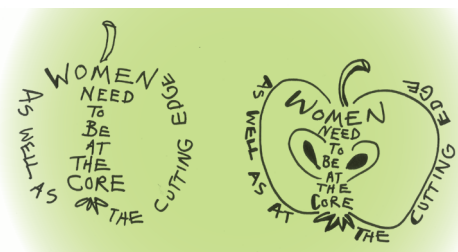
and are thus likely to be particularly vulnerable. Those living in poverty are less likely than others in their society to own private transport, take flights, or purchase many consumer goods such as energy hungry appliances, all things which make substantial contributions to carbon emissions. Since universally, more women than men live in poverty, women are considerably more likely to have a smaller than average carbon footprint for reasons of poverty. In 2008, median hourly earnings were £10.91 for women, compared with £12.50 for men, meaning that the gender pay gap has increased from 2007 to 12.8 per cent.

Women tend to have 'greener' attitudes and lifestyles than men

A number of surveys have shown that women are more likely than men to consider the environmental impact of purchasing decisions, and adopt lifestyle changes that reduce their contribution to climate change, such as vegetarianism and local food purchases. Women's tendency to have the main responsibility for child care may contribute to their concern for the environment for future generations.

Women tend to spend less on consumer goods and fly less than men

Women's prescribed gender roles also tend to act to reduce their contribution to climate change. For example, women are more likely to live in a household with dependent children, where income is likely to be spent on essentials such as food and clothing rather than consumer goods. By contrast, women are less likely to take flights, particularly for business considerations, which tend to have a larger climate change impact because first or business class passengers are given more space, resulting in higher emissions per person.



Women's role in tackling climate change

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

Women making national decisions

Currently, only 19 per cent of UK MPs are female. This lack of female representation means that it is less likely that women's interests will be adequately taken into account during decision making. 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, would also help reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Of the sixteen countries ranked by the UNDP as having high human development and that had reduced their overall carbon dioxide emissions between 1990 and 2004, thirteen had a higher proportion of female elected representatives than average (14.9 per cent).

Gender and COP15, the Copenhagen Conference

Political leadership represented by women at the conference was more significant than previous events, but still just reached 22% of those WEN surveyed. Unfortunately, the largest female constituent group were from civil society, at 37%, representing the international and national non-governmental organisations and was the first group excluded from the summit at the final crucial week because of lack of space.

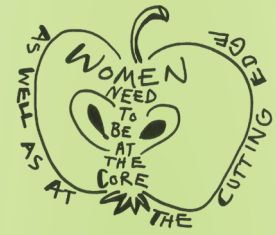
Gender and the REDD Framework

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-plus, accepted in principle. The REDD-plus agreement was the only gender related agreement mentioned in the Copenhagen Accord. The original REDD agreement was absent of any gender analysis, or awareness in the different roles that women play in preserving and working in forests and how that affects them economically.

We have high tolerance levels to toxic levels of under representation and are working on it.



What change is needed



Everyone must play their part in the follow-up to Copenhagen to ensure an equitable global deal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions sufficient to give a reasonable chance of keeping warming at or below 2°C. It is important that the UK's negotiating team is made aware of the gendered impacts of climate change, through gender training if necessary, and take this into account in their negotiating position.

Action is required on three fronts:

1) Gender-sensitive strategies to mitigate climate change – the more radical the cuts in emissions that are made in the next few years, the better the 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.

Gender Policy

Introducing policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 80% by 2050 whilst reducing inequality, such as improving household energy efficiency, investing in walking and cycling, and ensuring efficient, affordable and safe public transport. Support environmental education and pro-environmental behaviour change, often favoured and championed by women, as well as pursuing technological solutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Addressing gender inequalities

Initiatives could include reducing the disproportionate number of women living in poverty; replacing policies which enforce gendered roles, such as the disparity between maternity and paternity leave; improving work-life balance through policy and regulation; and improving gender equality in political and business spheres, as has taken place 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.

Women's Environmental Network is a registered charity educating, informing, and empowering women and men who care about the environment.

WEN promotes sustainable living and access to environmental health and security for all.

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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, WEN blog and Facebook.
- Send us your articles, news, photos and green tips for inclusion in our quarterly e-newsletter.
- Download our Gender and the Climate Change Agenda report – www.wen.org.uk
- Be part of the network: join WEN and get in touch with your WEN local group.
- Get a copy of WEN's Climate Club Handbook and join or set up a local club. Email: climatechange@wen.org.uk.
- 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 in your local area: examples include, WEN local groups, the Transition Town movement, Greenpeace, local 10:10 groups.
- Join the Stop Climate Chaos coalition – www.StopClimateChaos.org
- Join Climate Rush: <http://www.climaterush.co.uk/why.html> and Ukfeminista
- Spread the word – talk to others and make your voice heard. Organise film screenings to highlight the issues, eg. Sisters on the Planet (http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get_involved/campaign/climate_change/sisters/dvdform.html) The Age of Stupid (<http://www.ageofstupid.net/>)
- Raise the issues at your work place, or your children or grandchildren's school or nursery.
- Be an example to others through your lifestyle choices, eg. grow herbs on your window sill or grow some of your own fruit and veg, use public transport, walk, cycle, change to low energy light-bulbs, turn off equipment usually left on standby.