

The Climate Gender Nexus:

Climate Change is not Gender
Neutral

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RESEARCH PAPER

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The Sustainable Development Goals

Since the late 1900's the world has faced its fair share of crises and issues; with events such as World War 2, the Cold War, and the establishment of the United Nations (UN), the world has been attempting to find better ways to cooperate and communicate through diplomatic and economic means in order to avoid further crises. In an attempt to set the world on a path towards solving its crises, the UN along with its member states ratified the 2000 Millenium Development Goals. The 8 goals represented a unilateral agreement between all UN member countries to tackle the world's most pressing issues (WHO, 2018). Despite the MDGs being utilitarian in essence, developing countries were often unable to advance in the same way developed countries were as they had neither the technology nor the resources to do so (Jahan, 2003).

Following the 2015 target date for the MDGs, the United Nations and its member countries adopted 17 new Sustainable Development Goals that were more comprehensive, provided specific targets and indicators, and to an extent, took into consideration the ability of developing countries to achieve these goals as well. The SDGs seem to have been accepted worldwide – not only by governments but also by corporations and the general public. Today, we see an increasing number of companies and startups embracing the SDGs and utilizing them within the mission statements of their sustainability campaigns.

Of the 17 goals, SDG 5 (Gender Inequality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) represent two of the most vocal issues in today's world, inciting reactions such as climate action activism and protests to the #MeToo movement. These reactions have significantly altered the world's outlook, shifting focus to the immediate threat of climate change and providing a voice to gender equality movements. Despite this shift, these issues are rarely discussed in-tandem, instead, they are often debated as separate issues regardless of the nexus that exists between them. The Climate-Gender nexus is a product of the detrimental effects that climate change has on the world, specifically how climate change increases women's vulnerability more so than it does men (IUCN, 2018). To fully understand the nexus, we must first explore the impact climate change



and gender inequality have on our society. Within this paper, we will research and analyze climate change and gender inequality with a focus on the climate-gender nexus and its impact on women. This paper will also discuss the challenges that this nexus presents, along with some solutions and recommendations that have shown a statistically positive impact in reducing gender inequality and supporting climate action.

Climate Change

Climate change is regarded by many as the single greatest threat that humanity faces today. The current best-case scenario goal for climate change mitigation is to ensure the earth's temperature does not rise above a 1.5 degree Celsius increase. Put simply: the way to ensure the planet's survivability is to drastically decrease our collective carbon emissions (SOURCE). Multiple concepts to achieve this goal have sprung up over the years; from transforming our energy to incentivizing new technological advances, placing carbon taxes, and many more. These initiatives and policies are meant to curb the effects of climate change and mitigate its potential impact on society. There is also a need for strategic adaptation efforts for climate change. The ultimate deduction is that climate change and its effects are already being felt across the globe and will continue to impact society and therefore adaptation techniques and initiatives must be supported in order to improve our current quality of life and not severely negatively impact human development.

Climate change threatens not only our current way of life but also threatens to severely affect our most vulnerable communities. Some of the effects of climate change are longer periods of droughts, more frequent forest fires, and the duration and severity of hurricanes and tornadoes. Climate change will also have negative long-term effects on our planet that come with rises in temperatures and sea levels and frost-free seasons. (NASA, 2021). Yet this catastrophic impact is still without taking into account the on-ground impact it will have on people and civilization, an Oxfam (2020) article reported that in 2019 Mozambique experienced Cyclone Kenneth in areas that Cyclones had never been recorded since at least the satellite era, the article also



reported that Australia experienced both its hottest year on record and its worst-ever bush fires in 2020. This leads to the importance of quality policy and governance reforms in order to mitigate and adapt to the heavily influential effects of climate change.

Questions arise regarding the process world leaders take to conjure up the best strategies and plans to curb climate change and create impactful climate action and adaptation policies. One of the more prominent questions is the lack of inclusion of women in the decision-making process (Smith, Olosky, Fernandez, 2021). Women and girls have been and are currently still fighting the gender inequality battle with only recently - relative to history - finding liminal successes towards equality. Yet the lack of inclusion of women on the decision and policy-making table only widens the gender gap further, although research shows that bringing equal representation to the table would generate more impactful and sustainable results (UNDP, 2017).

Gender Inequality

The fight for gender equality has been a long and difficult one, occurring long before the #MeToo movement and the women's suffrage movement. Women and girls have been facing discrimination, unequal representation, and unequal rights as opposed to men and boys. Achieving gender equality, however, is more than simply changing policies or creating international agreements through transnational organizations, gender inequality, gender roles. The segregation that still exists in some countries today is taught and rooted from long ago and is often integrated within a country's culture, which presents a much more complex challenge that has slowed progress towards achieving gender equality. Whether we look at politics, work, or culture, the under-representation of women within all facets of society has been a major player in the continuous gender gap we face today. Currently, in reference to politics, only 1 in 4 representatives of parliament globally are women (UN Women, 2020). Within the workforce, women represent only 7% of all fortune 500 CEOs (UN Women, 2020); while this statistic is a new record for women, it is nonetheless a massive underrepresentation of women in workforce leadership positions.



Achieving gender equality is also sometimes derailed due to predetermined roles of women and girls as they are often defined by tradition, local history, and culture within communities – particularly communities within developing countries. These inherent definitions oftentimes pose as bottlenecks and obstructions to the growth and development of women within those societies. They also present barriers towards the education and economic freedom of women (OECD, n.d.). Furthermore, gender roles and norms are also known to affect how women are perceived and create prejudiced and stereotypical ideas as they influence the perception of people on what women can or should do. Within developing countries women have less access to technological literacy, education, training, and overall basic needs. Nevertheless, studies have shown that regardless of this lack of access, women in developing countries are not only placed in an income-generating role within their household, they also tend to work around 12 to 18 hours per day, usually in an agricultural role which places a heavy burden on women to not only be a caregiver within her family, but also an income provider (Akubue, 2001).

Women and girls are among the most vulnerable communities in the world, facing multiple discriminatory challenges including domestic abuse, underrepresentation within politics and media, and a gender pay gap within the workforce. Even climate change is not gender neutral, where women and girls have been recorded to feel the effects of climate change more than men and boys. Yet when policy makers and politicians seek to create initiatives to fight the impending effects of climate change, they assume that climate change is gender neutral and fail to create policies that support the most vulnerable communities as appropriately needed.

Climate Change is Not Gender Neutral: The Nexus

Climate change is an immediate threat to the world. It affects all aspects of society and, if allowed to continue its current trajectory, will severely impact our way of life and our adaptation efforts. Yet with all its potential damage and seemingly far-reaching impact, climate change is not gender neutral as “Women are increasingly



being seen as more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change, mainly because they represent the majority of the world's poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources.” (Osman-Elasha, n.d.).

To best address the climate-gender nexus and find appropriate solutions to facilitate it, we must explore the challenges that are hindering positive progress within the nexus. A UNESCO report has stated that the current social construct many developing countries abide by to this day is the main reason women and girls are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change (UNESCO, 2009). The report declares that the challenges women face as a result of gender inequality and discrimination makes them most vulnerable due to the assigned roles and norms placed upon them by their respective societies (UNESCO, 2009). Additionally, based on the statements of a 2016 UNDP report, women are generally overburdened with responsibility both at home and on a community-wide level.

In 2004, the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami revealed that over 70 percent of the victims were found to be women, many of those women were found trapped inside of their homes unable to escape the incoming danger due to their sense of responsibility, while most of the men of those families were outside of their homes and able to find designated shelter and safety locations.. The results were similar during Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, which disproportionately affected African American women more than any other community. The 2016 UNDP report on climate gender linkage also proclaimed that religious and cultural norms in developing countries play a role in hindering women from taking decisive action during times of emergency, which is effectively detrimental to a woman's mobility during times of crises due to social gender norms or expectations (UNDP, 2016).

Within developing nations, women farmers are currently responsible for about 45-80 percent of all food production labor. In addition, women account for two thirds of the labor force in developing countries and over 90% of women within African countries are a part of or are engaged in employment within the agricultural field (UN Women, 2009). This implies a connection between the impacts of climate change and the effects



it can have on gender inequality. With the rising temperature of the planet, droughts, and severe weather, the ability of women to perform their already daunting tasks becomes more difficult if not dangerous during some periods of the year.

The UNDP has reported that over eighty percent of people who have been displaced from their homes due to the increasing effects of climate change have been women. Coupling this information with the UNDP research findings that every nine out of ten countries worldwide have laws and regulations that present economic and social barriers to women(UNDP, 2016), it becomes evident that climate change is a heavy burden on women. Considering that women are also not granted the same tools or access to education, healthcare, or resources as men, all this and more defines the reasons behind why women are more vulnerable than men within the context of the climate crisis (UNESCO, 2009).

It becomes more evident that the climate-gender nexus not only exists but is a major hindrance towards achieving not only sustainable goals 5 and 13 but also all 17 of the sustainable development goals. Alongside understanding that the climate-gender nexus exists, it is also vital to ensure that women are involved in the process to fight the nexus. A 2009 UNESCO research article has revealed that women are not only affected most by climate change, but they can also be the main agents of change towards ensuring that the crisis can be tackled accordingly as they can provide their input and perspective, thus creating a gender-conscious response to climate change (UNESCO, 2009).

The Solutions

To tackle the climate crisis and ensure that gender equality is achieved across the globe, we must ensure our policies and our focus is towards addressing the climate-gender nexus as a whole. Multiple research and reports have shown that there are a number of effective policies and actions that can be taken to do so; from these reports, the following key messages to fight the climate-gender nexus have been analyzed:



Firstly, since climate change has been found to not be gender-neutral and instead affects women disproportionately to men, we must then present gender-sensitive responses to climate change. Currently, politicians and policymakers cater climate action towards a gender-neutral climate action plan. Without the incorporation of climate-gender nexus-based research and the modification of the climate action plan, climate policies will remain oblivious to the reality of gender inequality (WGC, 2017). Policymakers and international organizations must not only adopt new gender-sensitive data and approaches and consider action plans that recognize the struggles and challenges that women face worldwide, but they must also ensure that climate mitigation strategies result in an effective transition and support for developing countries to be able to deal with the climate crisis and support their most vulnerable communities as well (WGC, 2017).

The second key takeaway is access to educational opportunities and financial opportunities for women. A King's College London (2019) report shows that empowering women to work has been found to result in an increase in growth rates within the economies of developing countries, while a study from the International Monetary Fund (2016) adds that developing countries that have adopted policies that support or improve access to educational and financial opportunities to women have been found to reduce inequality and poverty within those country while simultaneously growing their economy due to the economic diversification and added workforce labor. Supporting women through access to education and financial means while also adding to a country's economy would provide a boost towards fighting climate change and adapting to its effects.

The third key takeaway to tackling the climate-gender nexus is ensuring equal political and social representation for women in local and federal government positions. "As the global community transitions to the implementation phase of the post-2015 development agenda, it is imperative that gender equality and women's empowerment



continue to influence, shape and drive the collective climate and human development effort” (UNDP, 2016) the solution to the nexus is found in the collaborative efforts of all parties and in ensuring that the people it affects most are at the forefront of the decision-making process. Not including women within the political sphere and providing them a seat on the decision making table would mean losing out on valuable perspectives and inputs from those who are most vulnerable to both climate change and gender inequality. A research study done by the UNDP (2019) has found that countries where women are represented more accurately within governing bodies have been found to care more for their environmental lands and ensure that they are protected. The same study has also shown that increasing the participation of women in government and parliament is crucial for the fight against climate change as women play a vital role in disaster prevention and community mobilization during risk management cycles (UNDP, 2009).

Conclusion

The sustainable development goals were made to fight against and solve the world’s most pressing issues. The United Nations and its member states were able to compile these issues into 17 SDGs, each with their own set of targets and indicators. However, the SDGs were not meant to be solved as individual problems. Instead, working towards one SDG would impact others, if not all of them. Today, the biggest threats the world is facing are climate change and gender inequality and they, much like the rest of the SDGs, are intertwined into the climate-gender nexus, as climate change is not gender neutral. If the world hopes to mitigate and adapt to climate change and achieve gender equality, then climate policies must not be gender-blinded. Women need to be equally represented within our governments and they must be given equal seats at the decision-making table.



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