Climate Change: Women and Girls

Extracts from a paper presented by Wendi Momen (SI Bedford) at COP26, 2nd November 2021

The consequences of climate change are severe, especially for those already affected by poverty and food insecurity, lack of access to education, health care and clean water, or by prejudices that limit the full exercise of their rights and for whom climate change has already had a negative impact on their lives and livelihoods.

Climate change threatens basic human rights - the right to life and the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well‑being of oneself and of one's family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security when one is unable to work.

Climate change affects women and girls differently from men and boys, owing to a gendered division of labour, cultural restrictions and different societal roles which make women’s work less secure, bars them from taking on roles that might improve their situation and exposes girls and young women to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Around the world, women are largely responsible for securing food, water and energy for cooking and heating. Scarcity of resources arising from climate change intensifies a woman’s and a girl’s burden and, at best, leaves less time to earn an income, attend school or care for the family. Natural disasters exact a heavier toll on women given their lack of access to information and resources, and, in some cases, their inability to drive, swim or even leave the house alone. As families strive to cope with these changes, they may resort to negative strategies, for example, forcing girls to leave school or to marry early, which itself increases the risk of gender-based violence.

Indeed, at whichever area of human life one looks, from economic stability to maternal health, to education, women and girls are generally worse off already and are even more negatively impacted by climate change.

It would be a mistake, however, to cast women as the victims or simply as under‑resourced members of society; they represent perhaps the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to overcome the challenges of climate change. Their responsibilities in families, in communities, as farmers and as stewards of natural resources make them uniquely positioned to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental conditions. The traditional knowledge of indigenous women can be particularly useful for developing locally-based responses to the effects of climate change. Women's distinct knowledge and needs complement those of men, and must be duly considered in all arenas of community decision‑making. It is in relationship and consultation with one another that the most effective strategies for mitigation and adaptation can be devised.

At governmental and international levels, including women in the formulation of disaster preparedness and response plans, and incorporating their knowledge and lived experience will ensure such plans include the particular needs of women and girls, are closely aligned to the sustainable development goals, and have the universal application that healthy families, communities and nations require if they are to survive.

Recognising the climate crisis as a human rights issue is central to efforts to create a sustainable, gender-equal future, one in which women’s rights are recognised as human rights and every woman and girl is able to achieve her full potential. In such a world, women have access to all resources and are represented equally with men in the decision-making spaces.

Approx. 4 mins.