

## Climate Change and Women's Rights: Current Challenges

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### Executive Summary

- ▶ This policy brief examines the current situation of the impact of climate change on women's rights as well as the marginalization of women on the political agenda in some countries around the world.
- ▶ It analyses the international and European framework on the evolution of different instruments dedicated to ensuring gender equality in climate change issues, while offering perspectives from our in-depth reflections and research in order to improve the desired gender equality.

As has been stated by F. Chioma Steady, "*climate change is probably the most important environmental challenge of the current century.*" (Women Climate Change and Liberation in Africa, 2014).

Across societies the impacts of climate change affect women and men differently. Women are often responsible for gathering and producing food, collecting water and sourcing fuel for heating and cooking. With climate change these tasks are becoming more difficult. Extreme weather events such as droughts and floods have a greater impact on the poor and most vulnerable and 70% of the world's poor are women. Despite women being disproportionately affected by climate change, they play a crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation.

On 28 June 2019, the Human Rights Council held a panel discussion on: "Women's rights and climate change: climate action, good practices and lessons learned". On this occasion, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that more than 17 million people were forcibly displaced in

2018, as a result of the effects of climate change and that these forced displacements carry particular risks for the effects of climate change. Furthermore, these forced displacements carry particular risks for women, including the risk of sexual violence and trafficking in human beings.

### Is Climate Change formally included in the International Agenda for the "Elimination of Discrimination Against Women"?

The preamble of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (hereinafter Convention on CEDAW), explicitly acknowledges that "*extensive discrimination against women continues to exist*" and emphasizes that such discrimination "*violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity*". As defined in article 1, discrimination is understood as "*any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex...in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field*", (S. CUSACK and L. PUSEY, Art.Cit p.7). The Convention gives positive affirmation to the



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Co-funded by the  
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principle of equality by requiring State parties to take "all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men."

In the light of the above, we can note that the notion of discrimination against women in the field of climate change is "indirectly" covered by the Convention. CEDAW is, therefore, supposed to ensure that countries parties to the Convention ban all measures that may discriminate against women in the fight against climate change. However, in my opinion, this general "indirect" jurisdiction does not allow CEDAW to play its role effectively in the climate field. It would be appropriate for the Convention to be amended and expressly extended to cover discrimination in the field of climate change. Indeed, as already noted, women are not only victims, but also agents of change and possess specific knowledge and skills to contribute effectively to climate change adaptation and mitigation; yet they are significantly under-represented in decision-making bodies at all levels.

### Need to deepen the Interaction between Gender, Sustainable Development and Climate Change

One of the keys to inclusive and sustainable development—and thus to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—is the understanding and effective consideration of the gender dimensions in addressing climate change issues, with a view to ensuring that women are key actors on an equal footing with men.

With particular regard to climate change, the United Nations recognized inter alia that: "*Climate change is now affecting every country on every continent*". It is disrupting national economies and affecting lives, costing people, communities and countries today and even more tomorrow. Weather patterns are changing, sea levels are rising, weather events are becoming more extreme - and greenhouse gas emissions are now at their highest levels in history - without action, the world's average surface temperature is likely to surpass 3 degrees centigrade this century. The poorest and most vulnerable people are being affected the most.

Affordable, scalable solutions are now available to enable countries to leapfrog to cleaner, more resilient economies. The pace of change is quickening as more people are turning to renewable energy and a

range of other measures that will reduce emissions and increase adaptation efforts. Climate change, however, is a global challenge that does not respect national borders. It is an issue that requires solutions that need to be coordinated at the international level to help developing countries move toward a low carbon economy.

That being said, within each SDG, more or less one target has typically been enacted in favor of women. With particular reference to Goal 13 on "climate change", Target 13.b recommends to "*promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities*".

Women are not only victims; they are also agents of change in terms of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. In much of the World, they propose innovative strategies to address the challenges of climate change. In this point of view, it is essential for government policies, action plans and strategies on climate change to include a gender dimension.

Moreover, with regard to the overall interaction between gender and sustainable development recent research has shown that countries in which women compose at least 30% of the legislature experience a significant improvement in population health, especially mortality rates. In addition to improving health, having more women in elected assemblies tends to reduce levels of corruption due to the creation of more inclusive policies for improving public service and by breaking up male-dominated collusive networks. The inclusion of women in politics also has been linked to an increase in national gross domestic product (e.g. 5 to 10% increase in the United States alone), more inclusive cities and greater police responsiveness in tackling crimes, especially against women and minorities. Essentially, when women are equally represented in politics, they have a clear and measurable impact on health, economy, security, safety and equality, which leads to more inclusive, sustainable and democratic policies that benefit everyone.

### The Evolution and Prospects of Gender Mainstreaming in the International and European Climate Agenda

At the United Nations level, gender mainstreaming in international climate negotiations has long been treated as a secondary theme. But in the last twenty years things have changed. Indeed, the process of



integrating gender into climate negotiations began in 2001, with the adoption of two decisions on gender equality and women's participation at the 2007 Conference of the Parties (COP) or COP7 in Marrakech, then in 2010 on the gender approach in climate financing, adaptation and capacity building, and in 2012 on equal participation. Since this year (2012), a space and a "Gender Day" (15 November) have been dedicated to gender issues at the United Nations Climate Conferences.

At the COP20 held in Lima (2014), for the first time since the negotiations began in 1992, a 10-year work programme on gender was proposed ("Lima work programme on gender equality in the context of climate change"). This has not been easy and could only be achieved thanks to the insistence and mobilization of international women groups that have made it possible, through several feminist organizations.

Since then, a report has been prepared annually by the United Nations on the progress made in the gender composition of the institutions of the Climate Convention and the Kyoto Protocol and the delegations of the Parties, as well as on the implementation by the secretariat of decisions on the gender perspective. In the same vein, the Preamble to the Paris Agreement of 12 December 2015 (COP 21) acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity, [...].

As part of the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement, COP22 was held in Marrakech from 7 to 18 November 2016. A "Marrakech Proclamation for Action on Our Climate and Sustainable Development" was adopted on 17 November 2016 by Heads of State, Governments and delegations, calling for "the strongest political commitment to fight climate change [...]. One of the particularities of this COP22 is that many initiatives have been launched in Marrakech to promote the integration of gender issues in climate affairs.

It is also worth noting the adoption of the "United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 35/20 of 22 June 2017 on Human Rights and Climate change". This resolution did not deal directly with gender in climate change-related issues, but it called upon states "to integrate a gender perspective in pursuing

*mitigation and adaptation responses to the adverse impact of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of human rights, including those of migrants and persons displaced across international borders in the context of the adverse impacts of climate change".* Thus, we could say that this resolution provided additional support for the dynamics of gender mainstreaming in climate issues.

Finally, we can close this panorama of COPs by mentioning that COP25 which took place recently from 2-13 December 2019 in Madrid has approved a Gender Action Plan, aiming to increase the participation of women in all UNFCCC processes and to support gender-respective climate policies.

At European Union level, the issue of ensuring gender equality in climate issues has become a matter of some concern, particularly in the current decade. In this perspective, the Council adopted on 25 June 2012 its conclusions on "Gender Equality and the environment: enhanced decision-making, qualifications and competitiveness in the field of climate change mitigation policy in the EU. These conclusions were based on a report of the European Institute for gender equality, entitled "Review of the Implementation in the EU of area K of the Beijing Platform for Action: Women and the Environment Gender Equality and Climate Change", which recognized that *"to develop and maintain a sustainable and effective response to climate change, a gender approach and gender-sensitive indicators must be an integral part of all policies and actions at all levels"*.

Along the same lines, six years later the European Parliament adopted, on 16 January 2018, the "Resolution on women, gender equality and climate justice" (hereinafter "Resolution"). The latter recognizes *inter alia* that:

*"[...] the impacts of climate change are experienced differently by women and men; whereas women are more vulnerable and face higher risks and burdens for various reasons, ranging from unequal access to resources, education, job opportunities and land rights, to social and cultural norms and their diverse intersectional experiences"*.

*"[...] women are particularly vulnerable to climate change and experience its effects disproportionately because of their social roles, such as providing water, food and combustible materials to the family and caring for others; whereas women are responsible for more than 70 % of water chores and management worldwide; whereas in regions most affected by climate change, 70 % of all women work in the agricultural sector, yet seldom participate in*



*developing climate policies*” (paragraphs B and C of the statement of reasons of European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2018).

The Parliament Resolution recognized in particular that *“gender equality is a prerequisite for sustainable development and the efficient management of climate challenges; [...] that women are not only victims, but also powerful agents of change who, on the basis of full participation, can formulate and execute efficient climate strategies and/or solutions in relation to adaptation and mitigation and can build climate resilience as a product of their diverse areas of experience and practical knowledge across sectors ranging from agriculture, forestry and fisheries to energy infrastructures and sustainable cities”* (paragraph 1 of the statement of reasons of European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2018).

That is why the Resolution also invited the European Commission *“to implement programmes through which the transfer of modern technologies and know-how can help developing communities and regions to adapt to climate change while working with women, who represent 70 % of the agricultural workforce in disaster-prone countries”*. In short, the resolution

made several recommendations to ensure gender equality in the treatment of climate issues.

## Conclusions

The climate crisis and the fight for women’s rights have more in common than it seems at first sight, as climate change reinforces discrimination against women in dealing with issues related to sustainable development.

After having identified some effects of climate change on women’s rights, this paper has explored the direct and indirect links between women’s rights, sustainable development and climate change, with a view to formulate appropriate proposals for the improvement of international policies for the protection of women’s rights.

While efforts are already palpable toward mainstreaming gender in international and European climate affairs, the desired “Parity” or “representativeness” of women is not still an acquired.



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Juliana Cici has been working for two years with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at its headquarters in Geneva. Currently she is the Secretary General of "Women Alb World" International Association and an activist for "Women's Rights and Gender Equality".

From 2006 to 2017, she was Deputy Commissioner within the Office of the People's Advocate (Ombudsman), in the Republic of Albania where she has been part of different working groups for the implementation of main reforms in areas such as Public Administration, Justice and Human Rights.

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GGPB N°2/2020

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Juliana CICI, Climate Change and Women's Rights: Current Challenges, Geneva Global Policy Brief No 2/2020, pp. 1-6.

Publications in the Series should be cited as:  
AUTHOR, TITLE, Geneva Global Policy Brief No ./YEAR [URL]

ISSN 2624-8603



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