

Gender Inequality in the Face of the Climate Crisis

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When we discuss climate change, the topic is frequently centered around its effect on the natural environment. Climate is a multi-disciplinary topic that spans intersections over political, social, economic, and environmental segways. Very rarely do we link this crisis to the nexus between the changing climate and the social environment—specifically in regard to gender. In a world constantly battling the lack of women's rights, this climate crisis only exacerbates the modern-day drivers of social inequalities by placing stress on already tense environments. This stress is even more evident in low-income communities and developing countries where the roles of gender are heavily implemented in tradition. Throughout history, women have stood at the forefront of environmental interactions, and yet, today, they face the biggest implications of environmental degradation. They have less access to depleting food and resource security, a greater displacement due to natural disasters, and a greater risk for sex and gender-related violent crimes. In a world facing a social crisis inside of an environmental crisis, we must ask ourselves how to parallel our fight to mitigate climate change with the threat that gender inequality poses on the safety of women and girls around the world.

Displacement

Four years ago, the US Global Change Research Program released the Fourth National Climate assessment. Four years ago, it was acknowledged that: "Climate change is altering the characteristics of many extreme weather and climate-related events. Some extreme events have already become more frequent, intense, widespread, or of longer duration, and many are expected to continue to increase or worsen, presenting substantial challenges for built, agricultural, and natural systems." (USGCRP, 2018). This is not new information, and nations around the world will have to develop solutions quickly if they hope to be able to cope with the growing fallout of these catastrophic events in coming years. For women, this means growing hardship and increased risk. Globally, women are often given roles as caretakers and providers of resources for their communities, which leaves them more susceptible to the damages of climate change displacement because their livelihood is bound so closely to the conditions of their local environment.

It is important to note that the term "climate refugee" is not yet recognized by the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2022), which means that people displaced or affected by climate change are not always granted the same aid and legal protection that other refugees may be. While it is possible for people in this situation to be granted refugee status (UNHCR, 2022), there does not yet exist

a term which is specifically tailored to helping those displaced by climate change. It is likely that many people have slipped through the cracks of the system as a result of this and did not receive help in their time of need. Not using specific, legally binding terms directly endangers people displaced by climate change, 80% of which are women (Halton, 2018), and therefore exacerbates the hardship that women face in the context of climate-related events. By creating terms to help those displaced by climate change, it can solidify an understanding of the disparate effects of climate change on men and women and garner an environment of refuge that saves the lives of all who are impacted.

Food and Resource Security

According to the (FAO 2010) 795 million people worldwide are undernourished, and food insecurity persists to be a major concern on the global agenda. In developing countries, the prevalence of gender inequality determines the roles men and women are responsible for, and thus, the resulting impacts of climate change on these differing roles (Cramer et al., 2016). The role of women in these communities is dependent on the allocation and responsibility to secure water, food, and cooking fuel. In environments where access to these resources is negatively impaired, there is an increased physical vulnerability (Pachauri et al., n.d.).

Globally, women contribute to 43% of agriculture and food production, and more than 90% of these women are located in African countries (Ziervogel & Ericksen, 2010). Traditional food sources are becoming increasingly scarce and unpredictable. The unreliability of these resource securities and the increased prospect of crop failure will inhibit the income and health of women, as well as create a market of nourishment that is inaccessible in these marginalized communities. Food security not only impacts food availability, but it also has a detrimental effect on the education of women, specifically girls. Evidence demonstrates that gender inequality, under the effects of climate change, threatens the future of child education, creating precedence of assumed-female roles in the family over the ability to go to school. Girls are often removed from school to help their mothers in the home, especially when the scarcity of food and water rises (UN Women Watch, n.d.). These girls rarely have a chance to continue their education, creating a greater disparity between genders.

Gender-Based Violence

As described in the CARES 2020 Report, the presence of climate change only deepens the driving tension between arbitrary, gender-based inequalities, exasperating the vulnerability and disrespect of women and girls. These increased vulnerabilities include gender-related violent crime, domestic abuse, sexual violence and harassment, underaged marriages, and human trafficking (UN Women, 2022). It is important to note that all genders face sex and gender-based violence (SGBV), but women and girls still face the greatest amount of violence (Desai and Mandal, 2021). Examples of these SGBV events are littered over communities and history. In the United States, many women were displaced to trailer parks after Hurricane Katrina. During this time, rape cases were 53.6 times higher than they were before (Bachelet, 2022). In Japan, disaster refugees and volunteers of the 1997 and 2010 earthquakes faced a greater chance of sexual assault and rape due to exposure. In Nepal, human trafficking evidently increased after the 2015 earthquake (Desai and Mandal, 2021). In Uganda and Karamoja, there is an increased influx of domestic violence and rape cases during and after droughts (Masson, Lim, Budimir, Podbok, 2016). In

areas like Micronesia, limited access to water causes women to walk farther, increasing their vulnerability and risk of rape and sexual assault. In Myanmar, domestic violence increased by 30% following Cyclone Nargis (The Asia Foundation, 2022). In many developing communities where climate induces a lack of sufficient food security, underaged girls are often condemned to early marriages (Desai and Mandal, 2021).

This is only the tip of the iceberg, and yet, there is no justice or mitigation measures in place to combat this rise in gender-based violence against women and girls. The climate crisis is so overwhelmingly discussed, but its indirect nexus to the increase in women who are sexually assaulted, abused, violated, raped, and killed is not. As termed by the UN Women, this is the "shadow pandemic". We are in a worldwide pandemic fueled by a web of overlapping crises. We are all fighting for our survival on this planet, but, in this fight, "women's bodies have become the battleground" (Desai and Mandal, 2021).

Conclusion

Gender inequality remains to be a modern-day crisis, and its prevalence evidently spikes in climate-related events and stress. Even in the face of gender-discrimination, displacement, lack of food security, and gender-related violence, women all over the world are still working to protect their planet and fight against climate change. Women are not just victims of gender discrimination and inequality; they are not just victims of climate change; women are powerful advocates of the natural world, and they can play a crucial role in fighting for the planet. Indigenous women in particular frequently lived in a harmonious symbiosis with their environment. Through intimate familiarity, they take the initiative in defending, conserving, adapting, and safeguarding the natural world and its resources, even in the face of gender inequality.

In the Paramo, located in the Ecuadorian Andes, a group of 86 women have developed a committee to combat the years of degradation and overgrazing in the ecosystem they call home. Although the men have abandoned the land, the women have worked together to develop successful means of sustainable agriculture and landscape management which has led to the revival of the Paramo and its biodiversity (UN Women, 2021). In the 1970s a group of female villagers led a logging strike in the Alaknanda Valley where they stood in place and refused to move from the forest. Not only did these brave women halt the deforestation of their land, they also facilitated a 10-year ban on commercial logging in the area (Mitra, 1993).

Women's environmental expertise and traditional ecological knowledge have always been underappreciated, yet it has the potential to have a significant impact on the progression of climate change research. Despite these invaluable contributions to local, national, and the global economies, women in many countries are excluded from important government or community decision-making sessions. Women deserve equitable participation in the decision-making processes. They deserve to have a say in the processes of laws and regulations at community, state, and federal levels. Their knowledge and experiences are critical resources which will undoubtedly be helpful contributions to the discussion as we attempt to save our species from the impending climate crisis. Climate does not see gender, but we can see the effects of climate change. If we do not put aside our arbitrary social divisions and find a symbiosis among ourselves, inequality will finally cease to exist because we will cease to exist.

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