

Women's Environment & Development Organization

A Just World that Promotes and Protects Human Rights, Gender Equality and the Integrity of the Environment, submitted to the United Nations 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

The Women's Environment and Development Organization highlights the crucial need to create a transformative and sustainable development agenda that moves beyond the limited and siloed agenda of the Millennium Development Goals and promotes actions that address the intersectionality of the incredible challenges facing people and the planet.

Since the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, data available on both the environmental and social situation worldwide has improved. For example, in October 2013, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its fifth assessment report, identifying numerous human-caused climate change effects and presenting several models of future effects across society and communities. In the social domain, recent reports on the status of gender equality and women's rights – including reviews of the Millennium Development Goals - highlight areas of inequality that must be tackled (gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, quality education, access to credit, land tenure rights, involvement in decision making and broadly, access and control of productive resources). These challenges require financial and human resources, political will, and transformation of structural inequalities and entrenched norms and behaviors that are barriers to progress.

The organization and partners have worked to establish strong links between available environmental and social data to ensure policies and programs holistically address the interconnection of gender equality, environment and development. For example:

- With climate change, rainfall patterns will vary and more extreme precipitation events are expected, affecting water availability and how and where crops are grown. In many countries, women are responsible for securing water resources for household consumption, which will become more time-consuming and may increase risks to personal security as women travel alone longer distances. Governments must take into account women's needs and include women in planning and implementation of infrastructure projects and safe water storage and harvesting technologies, which can strengthen women's rights, reduce time poverty and increase project effectiveness.
- In extreme weather events, women die at higher rates than men, often as a result of inequality and discrimination that limit women's mobility and coping strategies and puts them in a role caring for dependents. Positive action should redistribute care responsibilities and facilitate overcoming gender stereotypes, traditional roles and social norms. Involving women as leaders in disaster risk reduction - monitoring storms and taking action to ensure communities are prepared and knowledgeable about preventive actions- is an example.

- The majority of women in agriculture are small-holders and much household agricultural production and livestock rearing is done by women, making their contributions critical to food sovereignty. Crop output of women is often lower than men, because women have less access to resources. The State of Food and Agriculture 2010 reported that equalizing resources for women and men could increase yield for women by 20-30 percent, raising total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent. In many cases, women practice more sustainable, less water-intensive agro-ecological production that exemplifies sustainable development. Governments should recognize the skills, knowledge and innovative practices of women, and incorporate women as leaders and experts in developing and implementing adaptation and capacity building measures. Governments should also re-commit to action to improve women’s access and control of resources, including land, extension services and capacity building, and to efficient and sustainable agricultural practices, which will improve their production and help women and communities adapt to climate change and ensure food security.
- Ocean pH is changing due to climate change, affecting fish populations. This impacts the fishers and those in pre- and post-catch activities, many of whom are women. As women rely greatly on ocean and coastline resources, alteration of species and abundance will impact women and their families’ livelihoods, jeopardizing incomes and food security. Actions and funds should be allocated to ensure oceans and coastal areas are properly protected through gender-responsive projects that function as climate change adaptation strategies and provide alternative sources of income and nutrition. Examples include involving women to sustainably manage ocean resources and promote inland fishing and aquaculture activities; training women in more efficient processing techniques; and conducting market-chain analyses to increase access to credit, markets, and technology for improved storage.
- Sea level rise is happening. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that during the period 1901–2010, global mean sea level rose by 0.19 meters, and it is very likely that regions of high salinity where evaporation dominates have become more saline. A study in Bangladesh by Aneire Khan found that especially in low-lying coastal areas, climate-related sea level rise together with storm surges and cyclones is increasing the salt content of drinking water, compromising health through increased rates of pre-eclampsia and gestational high blood pressure in pregnant women specifically. Salinity also impacts food production. More data on links between environmental health and women’s health is needed. Governments should ensure everyone can exercise their right to a healthy environment, taking steps to recognize the problem and to adapt to and mitigate climate change – a global issue that knows no national boundaries.
- Climate change is expected to worsen climate-sensitive illnesses such as diarrheal diseases, malnutrition, malaria and dengue. Women are highly represented in the care economy, both through paid and unpaid work; increase in diseases will increase their work burden, take time from other activities and increase their contact with the diseases themselves. Redistribution of care work should be encouraged and undertaken (at household level and in public programs). Women, due to their societal role, often have knowledge of traditional plants and medicines that can be beneficial in fighting diseases. It should be recognized and utilized in a just way that benefits women and the community, building resilience, furthering knowledge and empowering women.

The Millennium Development Goals, with one goal on Gender Equality and no specific targets on combating climate change within the Environmental Sustainability goal, fail to address the interlinked nature of these challenges. Climate change is a threat to further progress and will cause backsliding without a multidimensional, integrated agenda. Governments should take advantage of different spaces, levels, policy processes and national implementation and identify how climate change is intimately linked to women's rights and gender equality, and vice versa.

Concrete examples are emerging from grassroots, local and national initiatives that recognize the importance of gender transformative sustainable development, with best practices for challenging inequalities, improving livelihoods, addressing climate change and promoting conservation and sustainable use of resources. This includes a key understanding that women and girls' access to quality education, training and decent work is both an issue of ensuring women's human rights, and of developing and implementing solutions for a sustainable future.

Key Recommendations for a Strong Outcome

- Governments should put the link between gender and environmental issues at the forefront and commit to clear guidance on how to implement policies and monitor programs to understand progress and adjust when needed. This is important as the world takes on low-carbon development pathways, incorporating safe and sustainable technologies and altering consumption and production patterns.
- Governments, civil society, and gender and climate experts should work together to develop tools and technical guidance for programs and projects that address women's rights and climate change.
- Governments should identify the needs, roles and barriers faced by women and men and address them through policies, fostering conditions to transform their roles - ensuring women and girls can freely redefine the parameters of their roles (whether in agriculture, health, engineering, the household or policy).
- Governments should enact safeguards to ensure new development models, venues and industries do not create new inequalities or reproduce existing inequalities. For example, employment is changing. Women are in the workforce, but due to lack of education, resources, assets and adequate time they are often in peripheral and informal jobs. A 'just transition' to new jobs is needed that updates labor policies, respects balance of worker and family responsibilities, provides skills training and leadership roles for women, ensures safe workplaces and promotes better sharing of care responsibilities.
- Governments should commit to supporting and fostering development of women's networks at all levels, to redefine institutional priorities and practices, offer support and technical advice to each other and drive achievement of women's rights and agreed development goals.
- Urgently collect sex-disaggregated data in all areas to allow clear understanding of existing practices and the status of women, as well as provide a baseline to measure progress against.

- Finally, implementation of policies and international agreements to promote gender equality and environmental sustainability must be facilitated through a comprehensive process that is part of the policy agreement. The process should focus on enabling conditions, strategic planning that incorporates actions developed through multi-stakeholder processes, and securing resources to implement on-ground gender transformative actions.

It is time to reflect and implement a more holistic, gender-just approach to combat climate change and environmental degradation. A rights-based approach is the only alternative to unsustainable and unjust development actions practiced so far, and the only way to guarantee future generations are able to fully exercise their rights.