

CLIMATE

Why Climate Change Is A Women's Rights Issue

BY NATASHA GEILING  JUN 24, 2015 8:00AM



This week, governments from around the world are convening at the United Nations headquarters to negotiate important pieces of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, a plan that builds on preexisting anti-poverty targets adopted by countries around the world. With negotiations underway, more than 600 organizations are taking to social media and sending representatives to the halls of the UN to remind delegates of an issue often overlooked in sustainable development: the role of women's rights, especially when it comes to climate change.

"A lot of people do not understand the links between women's rights and climate change," Eleanor Blomstrom, program director at the Women's Environment & Development

Organization, told ThinkProgress. “We often talk about it in terms of gender gaps and climate change impacts, and those [climate] impacts exacerbate existing [gender] inequalities.”

In 2009, the United Nations Population Fund took a deep look at the relationship between women and climate change in its [annual report](#), concluding that women “are among the most vulnerable to climate change, partly because in many countries they make up the larger share of the agricultural work force and partly because they tend to have access to fewer income-earning opportunities.” Moreover, the brunt of housework and family-care often falls on women, limiting their ability to quickly adapt to extreme and sudden weather-related disasters — statistically, the report said, natural disasters tend to kill more women than men.

In poor and developing countries, women are often charged with the task of providing critical resources — mainly food and water — for their family. On average, [63 percent](#) of rural households depend on women to obtain drinking water for the home. According to the UN, women in Sub-Saharan Africa spend an average of about 40 billion hours a year collecting water. As climate change decreases water availability, the amount of time dedicated to collecting water might increase, leaving girls with less time to go to school and reinforcing the cycle of poverty.

Women also make up the [majority of the agricultural](#) workforce in many developing countries, leaving them especially vulnerable to climate impacts like soil degradation and extreme weather. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women are responsible for 60 to 80 percent of food that is grown, while in Asia, they are responsible for around 50 percent, including 50 to 90 percent of rice cultivation.

Access to land and land ownership is another issue that bridges both women’s rights and sustainable development, according to Blomstrom. Globally, women tend to own far less land than men — but even when women do own land, some development projects still favor corporate interests over women’s rights.

“In many places women have access to land, but sometimes sustainable development projects that don’t take a gender perspective will take women off of that land and remove their rights to use it, or discriminatory laws will be brought to bear, which then impacts their ability to raise food for their families,” Blomstrom said. “There may be a sustainable development project that is a big sustainable fix, and instead of supporting women in their work it will make the land more valuable to a corporation.”

To combat gender inequality and climate change, Blomstrom said, it's important that proposed sustainable technologies — and proposed energy systems — be both “gender responsive and environmentally sound.”

“What is often most valuable are decentralized systems that are community based, as opposed to something like nuclear power,” Blomstrom said. And while it's helpful for sustainable technology to be designed by women formally educated in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), Blomstrom also explained that women without formal education, who have worked in a community their entire lives, can be useful resources because they often have unique knowledge about the community and local ecosystem.

“We think that you can't attain sustainable development without gender equality,” Blomstrom said. “But action needs to be taken toward both at the same time — you can't wait for one before working on the other.”

Blomstrom admits that women's rights and the environment aren't issues that are typically linked in policy discussions, but notes that forward progress is being made.

“In terms of climate policy making, there is certainly not parity,” she said. “At the same time, in developed countries there is a growing number of women entering STEM fields, but the question is, are those women also entering fields like sustainable energy? As it stands, women still tend to be underrepresented.”

Recently, there has been a small but steady increase in the representation of women that participate — as delegates and in leading roles — at climate negotiations. From 2008 to 2014, women delegates representing nations at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change rose from 33 percent to 38 percent, while women's participation as Heads of Delegations increased from 18 percent to 26 percent.

“You can't guarantee that a woman in a leadership position will make a decision based on gender-equality or low-carbon pathways, but it is still important to have women in decision-making positions when we're talking about something as important as sustainable development in the next 15 or 20 years,” Blomstrom said.

While much of the international community is looking ahead to the UN climate talks that will take place in Paris later this year, Blomstrom and other women's organizations are also focusing on the current Post-2015 talks, which are set to be finalized in September. The Post-2015 plan will go into effect in 2016, while the legal agreements of the Paris talks won't begin to be implemented until 2020 — meaning that the Post-2015 agenda could have a more immediate impact on how women's rights and the environment are handled moving forward.

As it stands, Blomstrom says that the Post-2015 Development Agenda doesn't include strong links between women's rights and climate change, something that she hopes the negotiators amend before finalizing the agenda.

"There are a lot of opportunities to jump start national action plans and have a global plan that can see how we're progressing in terms of women's rights and gender equality and on the issue of climate change," Blomstrom said.