

# The gender dimension of water and climate change



At the 22nd United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP22), a decision on “[Gender and Climate Change](#)” was taken by countries to underscore the importance of coherence between gender-responsive climate policies and the balanced participation of women and men in the Convention’s processes.

**Introduction** | The significance of women’s participation to climate policy and climate change mitigation and adaptation is multi-faceted. Women are often made more vulnerable as a result of the adverse impacts of climate change, especially in developing countries. They also play a crucial role as change agents however, and often have a catalytic effect on the achievement of human development, good governance, sustained peace, and harmony between environment and people - all of which are prerequisites for successful adaptation to climate change.

The impacts of climate change are most dramatically felt through changes in water - changes that will severely affect humans, societies and the environment (IPCC 2013, 2014). More than 90 per cent of climate manifestations, for example droughts, floods, and hurricanes, occur through water.

**Gender, climate change and water** | One of the main keys to fulfilling the goals set out in the Paris Agreement will be wise water management. The importance of involving everyone in the management of water was recognised at the United Nations Water Conference in 1977, and reinforced at the International Conference on Water and Environment in Dublin in 1992. The Third Dublin Principle also states that women provide, manage and safeguard water in ways defined by women themselves.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals have three dedicated goals for Gender Equality (SDG 5), Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), and Climate Action (SDG 13). Water management connects these goals. Identifying interlinkages between these goals will facilitate more effective implementation of the goals. Gender equality and gender responsive activities are also recognized elements in the Paris Agreement.

**Structural inequalities and norms** | Women are central to the collection and safeguarding of water (responsible for more than 70% of water chores and management worldwide) and

are therefore key to laying the foundations of a resilient society. Their role in decision-making processes is however often limited. Evidence-based research clearly indicates that water management activities gain efficiency and impact when both women and men are involved in decision-making.

Gender inequalities that reduce women’s access to resources, such as limited ability to own land and acquire concessions for ground-water abstraction, disproportionately increase their burden of climate change-induced consequences. These include decreased food security, and shortage of and reduced access to water resources. They impact their responsibilities as primary care givers, as well as the health of their families. It also impacts agricultural production and the care of livestock, and increases the overall amount of labour that is expended to collect, store, protect and distribute water (UN WomenWatch, 2009).

**Natural disasters** | Natural disasters impact women more severely due to structural inequalities in economic and social rights, and cultural, economic and social disadvantages.

According to Oxfam, more women died in the 2004 tsunami in Thailand because they stayed behind to look for children and relatives, because of social norms, and due to lacking skills like swimming and climbing trees that are taught to boys, not to girls (Oxfam, 2005).

For example, in the coastal area of Satkhira, Bangladesh, the water borne impacts of climate change disproportionately affect women. A combination of tidal flooding, inundation by storm surges, and saltwater intrusion has led to increased salinity in the groundwater and freshwater ponds. *Cont.*

As a result, potable water is a scarce and precious commodity. The impact of the acute drinking water crisis in Bangladesh is borne disproportionately by women who traditionally are responsible for collecting water.

A World Bank study identified that climate change is likely to further increase river and groundwater salinity dramatically by 2050 and exacerbate shortages of drinking water and irrigation in the southwestern coastal areas of Bangladesh. This will adversely affect the livelihoods of at least 2.9 million poor people in a region where 2.5 million people already struggle with a lack of water. As water sources dry up and demand increases, women are forced to walk further and further to provide water for their families.

**Women and agriculture** | Women are the primary producers of food globally and make up the majority of agricultural workers

in many countries – sectors greatly affected by climate change. They are also hit harder by irregularities in precipitation due to climate change as they rely more on rain-fed agriculture (CEDAW, 2013).

### **Equal participation and mandates for decision-making** |

While the numbers of women on UNFCCC boards, bodies and government delegations have improved slightly in recent years, women continue to be underrepresented, particularly in high-level positions. At COP16 in Cancun, for example, women accounted for as few as 30 per cent of all delegation parties and between 12 and 15 per cent of all heads of delegations to the UNFCCC. Since COP 21 the size of delegations are increasing, however the share of women in the delegations is dramatically decreasing.

#### **Recommendations:** See Decision -/CP.22 “Gender and Climate Change”.

1. Given the gendered and hydro-dimension of climate adaptation and mitigation, parties and the Secretariat should consider these interlinkages in the technical expert meetings on mitigation and adaptation, in accordance with decision 1/CP.21, paragraphs 111 and 129; all in accordance with §16.
2. In response to §29, the water aspects of climate change and the gender-dimensions of its implications, should be considered in the in-session workshop aiming to develop a gender action plan, referred to in §27 and accordingly in §29. In addition, the water-climate connection should be considered and accordingly addressed in the Lima work programme on gender, as per defined in §6.
3. In response to §7, 8, and 9, parties need to ensure that training builds the capacity for equal participation among female and male delegates to actively take part in the UNFCCC meetings.
4. In accordance with §27, the SBI should consider the hydro-climate implication to a gender-related decisions and in the identification of priority areas
5. In accordance with §11, 12, 13, 16 and 29, workshops and trainings should consider topics related to hydro-climate impacts and the link between water, gender and climate change. The technical paper, as per defined in §13, should suggest water as one entry point to be considered as a work stream under the SBI and its forty-eight session.

#### **About this brief**

This policy brief, prepared by SIWI and Alliance for Global Water Adaptation (AGWA), is a contribution to the discussions and activities at UNFCCC meetings in order to improve understanding and application of gender and water knowledge in the climate arena.

The Alliance for Global Water Adaptation (AGWA) and its member organizations stand committed to contribute to capacity building and support to the integration and application of water knowledge in climate mitigation and climate

adaptation activities. This includes to provide guidance and recommendations on how water management can contribute to an efficient implementation of the NDCs.

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