



Food and Agriculture Organization
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Women's leadership and gender equality in climate action and disaster risk reduction in Africa

A call for action



This brief builds on the recommendations from the webinar jointly organized by FAO, ARC and WFP on “Advancing Women’s Leadership in Climate Action and Governance” in March 2021. It was prepared by FAO Regional Office for Africa Gender and Climate Change teams, in collaboration with the Africa Risk Capacity Gender Team.



The impacts on food security and levels of poverty are expected to be significant, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of the population still relies on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods.

(FAO, 2016)

►► Climate change and disasters affect women and men differently

In the last decade, climate and weather-related disasters and extreme events have risen disproportionately in both incidence and gravity in Africa (FAO, 2021a), making it one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change. The impacts on food security and levels of poverty are expected to be significant, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of the population still relies on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods (FAO, 2016).

The effects of climate change and disaster risks do not affect all individuals and groups in the same way but are shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities and social differences in socio-economic status, sex, gender identity, age, ethnicity and dis(ability), among others. Vulnerable and marginalized people with limited access to and control over assets and essential resources as well as to social security, services and credit will find it harder to mitigate, adapt to and recover from climate shocks (Grabe, Grose and Dutt, 2014; FAO, 2011; FAO, 2021a; Fisher and Carr, 2015; IPCC, 2014; Resurrección *et al.*, 2019; UNDRR, 2019; Yeboah *et al.*, 2019).

In particular, despite playing key roles in natural resource management, ecosystem restoration and conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (FAO, 2019), rural, indigenous, ethnic minority and pastoralist women still face immense barriers in access to and control over natural resources, services, technology, information and decision-making. These barriers are rooted in discriminatory norms and practices that affect women's autonomy, voice and bodies, and perpetuate their vulnerability to climate hazards (Resurrección *et al.*, 2019).

Women's heavier reliance on natural resources and ecosystem goods and services, as well as differences in the roles of women and men in natural resource management shape gender differences in adaptive capacities, exposure to risk, and vulnerability to losses in biodiversity and other natural resource services (FAO, 2021a).

For example, with increasing degradation of ecosystems, women and girls suffer from heavier workloads, as they are forced to travel longer distances to look for water, wood for cooking and heating, other forest products and feed. This, in turn, increases their exposure to the risks of sexual violence, rape and trafficking (Resurrección *et al.*, 2019; Kristjanson *et al.*, 2017; Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019).

As households experience economic hardship due to the impacts of climate change and disasters, the adoption of negative coping strategies also affects women and girls' access to nutritious food, education and health. These negative strategies include prioritizing



men and boys in food distribution, withdrawal of girls from schools, early marriages, and trafficking. The situation is further exacerbated by lack of safety nets, and the absence and inaccessibility of essential services, such as sexual and reproductive health services, which become even more unavailable during disasters and shocks.

Evidence also indicates that young people are negatively affected by climate hazards in terms of security, well-being and even mental health (Eskenazi *et al.*, 2020). For example, the absence of safety nets, for girls in particular, means that young people have weaker capacities to diversify their livelihood options in case of shocks (Eskenazi *et al.*, 2020; Yeboah *et al.*, 2019).

Traditional norms that marginalize women and girls can result in fatal outcomes in the event of a disaster. For example, social norms that prevent women from learning to swim may result in women and girls drowning. Studies show strong links between climate-related disasters and female mortality, with women, boys and girls 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster and women constituting 80 percent of people displaced by climate change (Peterson, 2007; Bradshaw and Fordham, 2013; UN, 2020).

Conversely, evidence shows that when meaningfully engaged, women can contribute significantly to co-creating resilience and adaptation strategies and solutions, given their understanding of the environment and their role as custodians of ancestral and traditional knowledge. Yet, women's needs and interests are not sufficiently taken into account and women's leadership not promoted in key decisions around mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction (DRR) (Beddington *et al.*, 2012; FAO, 2016; FAO, 2019).



►► Addressing the gender gap in climate action and disaster risk reduction

Gender equality is critical to ensuring inclusive and socially just climate action and DRR. Gender-blind climate change and DRR-related interventions can further exacerbate structural gender inequalities that put women and girls' rights and agency at risk by limiting their access to resources and opportunities and agency, and creating new types of exclusions (CEDAW, 2017).

In order to unlock women's leadership and gender equality in climate action and DRR, policies and programmes will need to address, at minimum, the following barriers:

Lack of access to and control over resources, services and technology

Evidence shows that women farmers are less likely to adopt sustainable and resilient farming approaches due to their limited access to necessary resources, including land, labour, information and technology, and their lower levels of literacy, capital accumulation and weaker access to credit (Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019; Namubiru-Mwaura, 2014; Theriault, Smale and Haider, 2017). Women and girls often have less access to technology, including digital services and apps, than men and boys. For example, sub-Saharan Africa has one of the widest mobile gender gaps in the world with more than 74 million women not connected (FAO, 2021b). This digital divide limits their access to information and capacity to respond to disasters (Tall *et al.*, 2014). The level of sustainable agricultural mechanization also remains minimal in sub-Saharan Africa, with human labour accounting for 65 percent and women providing a significant amount of that labour. Lack of access to labour-saving and women-friendly machinery intensifies women's drudgery and time poverty.

Poor participation in decision-making and leadership

In many rural areas in Africa, decision-making and leadership in natural resource management and governance and climate action are male-dominated. The poor involvement of women in decision-making and their weak negotiating power, coupled with rigid patriarchal social norms and value systems, can prevent women from actively participating in climate action or DRR initiatives and/or saving themselves in disaster situations (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2010). The lack of meaningful representation and participation of women in decision-making bodies may translate into climate action that does not take into account the specific needs of women and men from different social groups (Resurrección *et al.*, 2019).



Low literacy and education levels

According to a recent report, while 65.5 percent of people aged 15 years and above in sub-Saharan Africa can read and write, the gender gap in literacy has increased between 2000 and 2019 (Faria, 2021). This hampers women's ability to access and understand climate change and disaster information and services (Brody, Demetriades and Esplen, 2008). For example, women's lower literacy levels make them less likely to respond to written early warning announcements and instructions, which increases their vulnerability (FAO, 2021b). Furthermore, during disasters, girls may be taken out of school to reduce household expenses while boys continue their education.

Lack of institutional capacity and policies that support gender equality in climate action and DRR

In spite of advances made over the last few years, in Africa, institutions and policies that support gender equality and women's empowerment in climate action and DRR are generally lacking (Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019; Jerneck, 2018). Research also suggests that many climate policy-makers on the continent feel ill-equipped to understand and apply human-rights standards and principles in their work (MRFCJ, 2016). Climate action and DRR related policies that do not prioritize gender equality and women's leadership run the risk of further exacerbating already existing gender gaps.

►► Centering gender equality and women's leadership in climate action and DRR in Africa

African countries have outlined bold aspirations to build climate-resilient and low-carbon economies in various frameworks and their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (UNECA, 2020). As governments evaluate, revise, enhance and implement their NDCs and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), it is essential to recognize and support women's leadership in climate action and address the gender barriers identified earlier.

African leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to build more resilient and equitable economies by investing in inclusive and gender-responsive climate change and DRR programming, plans and policies. Policies must strengthen national and local institutions, foster coherence between financing and public investments related to climate change and DRR, and promote gender equality and women's leadership.



To be truly transformative, policies and programmes will also need to go beyond those elements directly related to climate change (Resurrección *et al.*, 2019), taking a multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach that prioritizes the transformation of discriminatory social and gender norms, and operates strategic, concerted and intentional changes to the systems that perpetuate risk, vulnerability and inequality.

This section highlights policy actions for gender-responsive climate action and DRR.

1. Increase women's leadership and decision-making in climate change and disaster risk reduction

- ▶ Support a transformative feminist agenda that addresses the root causes of gender and social inequalities and power asymmetries in climate change and DRR by advocating for changes in attitudes and practices that (re)produce discrimination and marginalization.
- ▶ Support and promote women's participation in decision-making processes in DRR and climate action, and in climate change COPs negotiations, including climate change mitigation and adaptation and disaster risk mapping and solutions.
- ▶ Promote and nurture the leadership of diverse women (across generation, socio-cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds) and women's rights organizations and movements through creation of mentorship and capacity development/education programmes.

2. Make climate finance more gender-responsive

As country institutions and technical and financial partners develop their climate-smart agriculture initiatives and climate finance programmes and projects, they will need to:

- ▶ Set aside and track the use and impact of specific resources and finances targeted at promoting women's empowerment and gender equality in climate action and DRR. This may require to increase the percentage of climate finance targeted towards gender-responsive climate solutions, particularly at grassroots level.
- ▶ Design dedicated funding programmes/platforms focused on improving women's livelihoods and resilience.
- ▶ Increase the support, accountability, quality and flexibility of funding to autonomous women-led/women's rights organizations and environmental defenders working in climate change and DRR.
- ▶ Utilize blended finance solutions to de-risk climate change and DRR projects, making them bankable while mitigating climate change impacts and disaster risks.



3. Build institutional and individual capacity for mainstreaming gender into climate action and DRR

- ▶▶ Dedicate specific resources and funds to build the capacity of government actors at different levels and other stakeholders to mainstream gender in climate action and DRR.
- ▶▶ Ensure that women and girls and marginalized groups have equal access to training and skills-development programmes to promote their full participation and leadership in climate change and DRR.
- ▶▶ Strengthen the capacity of women and women organizations to participate in crucial policy-making fora in agriculture, forestry and land-use sectors, energy, finance, climate change and DRR.

4. Improve data for informed decision-making and better monitoring

- ▶▶ Promote evidence-informed policy-making based on rigorous and multilevel gender and intersectional analyses that identify ways to address context-specific constraints and gender gaps.
- ▶▶ Ensure that age- and sex-disaggregated data on climate change and DRR are collected, analysed and used systematically in policy, programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- ▶▶ Improve the capacity of national statistical systems and other data producers to collect, analyse, share and use sex- and age-disaggregated data
- ▶▶ Utilize local and traditional knowledge and involve primary users of the land, natural resources and the environment, including women, indigenous groups and marginalized communities, in data collection and analyses to inform local and national climate action and DRR programmes and strategies.
- ▶▶ Involve women in the development and dissemination of high-quality information about climate hazards, vulnerability assessments and review of the effectiveness of early-warning systems.

5. Improve women's access to information and technologies

- ▶▶ Ensure that communication on climate change and disasters is culturally appropriate and allows for feedback from both men and women.
- ▶▶ Use appropriate communication tools, particularly for women at grassroots level for whom information technologies are not easily accessible. Promote the use of low-cost, easy-to-use media that does not require literacy nor interfere with women's work.
- ▶▶ Bridge the gender digital divide and improve women's access to and use of ICT for greater participation in managing DRR and climate-related risks and decision-making.



- ▶ Promote girls' involvement in STEM and climate-related disciplines and promote participation of women in career-development opportunities in climate change and natural resource management bodies at all levels.

6. Improve policies and governance to address climate change and disaster risk

- ▶ Establish and ensure the proper implementation of gender-responsive governance frameworks in climate action for more disaster-resilient agricultural systems.
- ▶ Craft policies, strategies and interventions that intentionally address existing inequalities and transform discriminatory socio-cultural norms at regional, national, and local levels.
- ▶ Involve women, feminist activists, and women human rights and environmental rights defenders in the research, design, implementation, and review of policies and programmes for successful and sustainable solutions to climate change and disasters.
- ▶ Integrate and coordinate approaches, plans, policies and programmes for disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation and adaptation to reduce the fragmentation of resources and improve the impact of investments.
- ▶ Set up monitoring frameworks for accountability that help track and benchmark progress on gender transformation in climate action and DDR.




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