

# Climate Justice and Gender Inequality

**Kübra KOLDEMİR**

Argüden Governance Academy  
Sustainability Researcher

**Richard BETTS**

KPMG  
Sustainability Director

**Dr. Erkin ERİMEZ**

ARGE Consulting  
Partner

Oftentimes, we hear the narrative that tackling so-called environmental issues such as climate change are about saving the planet. But really, it's about saving us, about saving humanity. Environmental issues such as climate change are also indivisibly social and economic issues. This is why there is a term called climate justice, highlighting how it is essential to connect the causes and effects of climate change to concepts of environmental and social justice. It underscores the human, ethical and political dimensions presented by climate change and how it is misplaced to think of climate change as purely an environmental issue.

Climate change affects all countries, but the impact is not equally distributed between countries, income groups, generations, minorities or gender. In terms of gender, studies show that climate has disparate impacts on men and women emanating from the social construction of gender roles and relations.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers report robust evidence that demonstrate that women are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change, not because there is something inherently vulnerable about women, but rather due to socio-cultural structures that deprive women of access to resources, information, and decision-making structures.<sup>2</sup>

Climate change can increase gender inequality, for example by reducing women's ability to be financially independent. It can negatively impact their human rights, especially in economies that are heavily based on agriculture. This is due to gender roles, especially in the developing world, which means that women often depend on the natural environment for subsistence and income. Climate change, by further limiting women's already often limited access to physical, social, political, and fiscal resources, can exacerbate existing gender inequality.

Furthermore, poverty research reveals that many of the poor are women because, as a group, they have less social power.<sup>3</sup> Many women in developing countries are farmers, but women as a group have trouble obtaining education, income, land, livestock, and technology and own a disproportionately small part of agricultural land and land rights, meaning climate change may negatively impact female farmers more than male farmers by further limiting their resources.<sup>4</sup>

## How Much Do Gender Equality Plans by Corporations Help?

Many corporations now monitor and report comprehensively on diversity and inclusion and are striving to link profit with purpose. Many companies now report on their historic performance, future

<sup>1</sup> <https://careclimatechange.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.carbonbrief.org/tackling-gender-inequality-is-crucial-for-climate-adaptation>

<sup>3</sup> Rodenberg, Birte. Climate Change Adaptation from a Gender Perspective: A Cross-cutting Analysis of Development-policy Instruments. German Development Institute, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

targets and set and report quotas for gender equality and other areas. However, many corporations are still under pressure from employees and other stakeholders unconvinced by the progress that has been made. Why?

While one important question concerns setting and reporting on targets, an even more fundamental question is why gender issues exist in the first place.

In terms of gender inequality, a key reason may be that a lot of women's issues are very difficult to change because they are deeply ingrained in our cultures. For example, many gender issues are subtle, yet pervasive, and have long been accepted in our societies. Hence, we have tended to accept them as "normal" without questioning these social constructs as we are too busy caught up in our modern hectic lifestyles to take a step back and question societal norms and expectations. However, it is important to recognize gender and other inequalities that can be pervasive in our societies. These include structural inequalities that require much deeper action than simply meeting targets. Without a fundamental mindset shift regarding what we perceive as "normal" it is a moot point whether women can truly reach their full potential in the workplace.

### Climate Change: A Case in Point

Returning to climate change, it is a case in point that shows how issues pertaining to human rights and social justice can impact both genders differently.

Evidence shows that the global south is currently more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change as people there are vulnerable to climate-induced events including heat waves, droughts, floods, and sea level rise which could result in crop losses, potentially resulting in poor people losing their homes and having to migrate to refugee camps. In such areas, men often migrate to work away from their family but may not be able to remit enough money for women and their families to sustain themselves. Women, then, often assume the responsibility for looking after their

children, earning their living, finding water and firewood in many disadvantaged communities in developing countries. In such conditions, women are more vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse, and rape.

Even though women mostly work in agricultural jobs in many developing countries, their land ownership is very low. Land ownership is critical to get access to financing through bank loans to improve agricultural production. Consequently, many women fall into the hands of private lenders who often charge much higher interest rates than banks.

Negative impacts from climate change on women are not limited to developing countries. For example, research in the US has demonstrated how women are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change.<sup>5</sup> A study examining the impact of Hurricane Katrina on displaced people and families in trailer parks in the US found that the rate of violence more than tripled for women surveyed in the year following the storm, and elevated risks persisted two years after the storm.<sup>6</sup>

Studies show how men and women are affected in financially different ways by disasters. Especially in many developing countries, women tend to have less emergency savings compared to men. As a result, more women apply for loans to recover their businesses after disasters.<sup>7</sup>

The burden is not shared equally either as evidence shows that women take more responsibility for looking after children, the elderly and the infirm after disasters.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, this further adds to women's already busy lives from paid work and existing household duties. Studies have also shown that in poor areas, many women tend to donate their food in times of food scarcity, leaving them more vulnerable to health, social, and psychological damages.

These examples highlight how there are no easy fixes because the fundamental issues that lead to those inequalities are also entrenched in our cultures.

The difficulty regarding the identification of some gender issues can make women sometimes appear

<sup>5</sup> *Gender and Climate Change in the United States: A Reading of Existing Research*, WEDO and SIERRA CLUB, March 2020

<sup>6</sup> *Increased gender-based violence among women internally displaced in Mississippi 2 years post-Hurricane Katrina*. Anastario, M., Shehab, N. & Lawry, L., *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* 3, 18–26 (2009).

<sup>7</sup> *A population on the brink: American renters, emergency savings, and financial fragility*., West, S. & Mottola, G, *Poverty & Public Policy* 8, 56–71 (2016).

<sup>8</sup> *Displacement, gender, and the challenges of parenting after Hurricane Katrina*., Peek, L. & Fothergill, A., *NWSA Journal* 20, 69–105 (2008).

ungrateful or demanding when in fact they may be genuinely trying to voice a very basic inequality issue and explain themselves. Therefore, the subtlety of some gender issues can be very confusing due to the way we all have been raised.

These examples also show that inequalities can be made worse by prevailing cultural norms. Studies show that our gender constructs lead men to typically save more compared to women while the latter remain more focused on the needs of their families. After a major disaster, there is typically the need to rebuild one's life and hence having savings is crucial. Indeed, the lack of savings is a key reason why there are disproportionately more women who have to take the burden of taking loans compared to men. For all these reasons, when they are trying to rebuild their lives, it is often more difficult for women to recover after a misfortune has happened.

## What Are Some of The Solutions?

Disadvantaged groups are rarely included in the planning process at local, national, and international levels for coping with the impacts of climate change.<sup>9</sup> Hence, one way to mitigate the disproportionate impact of climate change on disadvantaged groups is to involve them in the planning and policy-making process and through the empowerment of women in politics, social institutions, and business. This way, by being inclusive we all have the opportunity to have a say in our future.

Business could create an opportunity to develop diverse solutions for the challenges of climate change. Since men and women have different perspectives and experiences, achieving a more diverse and inclusive workforce can be expected to make decision-making more productive and fruitful.

Indeed, when there is an underrepresentation of women and minorities in business or broader society, then it is not representative of the expectations and needs of the society as a whole. There is untapped potential. However, if we change our mindsets and challenge deeply entrenched social norms, then we all

stand to benefit. As we live in a highly interconnected planetary system, we all benefit from addressing systemic issues.

## In Conclusion

Corporates can play an important role in empowering women, especially if company leaders address gender issues by providing in-depth solutions and if they lead the way in questioning and challenging our cultural norms whenever they may lead to inequality. Creating opportunities for the development of women's businesses especially in the global south could also improve the resilience of women and societies.

Additionally, corporations should have a long-term sustainability plan for gender equality (SDG 5). This requires long-term thinking and a learning mindset. Companies that identify gaps and share action plans on how they will address them will be better positioned for continuous improvement.<sup>10</sup> According to an impact research called "[Sustainability Governance Scorecard ©](#)" by Argüden Governance Academy, which evaluates companies through a governance lens, only 39% of leading ESG-compliant global corporations align their overall strategy with SDG 5 (gender equality). Even though the study shows that SDG 5 is being now adopted by a growing number of companies, there still is room for improvement in this area. However, in light of our collective experience during COVID, there is now huge momentum for change. The latest KPMG CEO Outlook Report (2020) found that, at the start of the year, 77% of global CEOs said that the primary objective of their organization was purpose or societal-driven.<sup>11</sup>

The involvement of more women in politics, and management, executive and board positions in corporates would promote participatory and collective decision-making which is an important aspect of good governance practices. Therefore, implementation of good governance practices in both public and private sector will enable us to fix some of the gender inequality issues.

<sup>9</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/old-site-downloads/download-524-The-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Minorities-and-Indigenous-Peoples.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://sgscorecard.argudenacademy.org/research-findings/sustainability-performance>

<sup>11</sup> <https://home.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/xx/pdf/2020/09/kpmg-2020-ceo-outlook.pdf>