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**The Twofold Economic Interplay of**  
**Women being the Sufferer and Saviour**  
**of Climate Change**

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## **Abstract**

*An increasing amount of literature and research is emerging focusing on the gender disparities that exist in the vulnerability to climate change. Women bear the responsibility of their households from bearing to rearing children, as well as cooking and cleaning, and on top of that, they have added responsibilities of fetching water and often working other small jobs to contribute a menial amount to their family income as well. Moreover, their health and safety are not prioritised. As compared to men, they face more discrimination, stereotypes, violence, and trauma. Even among the poor, women are the worst affected. This predisposition to vulnerability creates harsher impacts on women's socioeconomic status, health, safety, and susceptibility to trafficking and abuse as a result of climate change. This paper aims to argue that while policies to combat environmental degradation are necessary and in progress, they lack an equitable basis as they do not account for differences in women and men's role in this movement. As these policies are implemented, steps need to be taken to ensure that the disparities are looked into and formulated in accordance with such analysis. Recommendations are made to make the existing policies address the growing gender disparities and promote the economic independence of women as a means to better the climate change problems, which in turn, will lift women's economic status.*

**Keywords:** *Climate change, economy, women's economic growth, SDG 13*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Undoubtedly, climate change is one of the most pressing ecological and environmental issues that the world is facing. It is also an additional threat to civil rights, stability, and economic growth for numerous groups and societies. The combat against climate change is growing more vigorous with every passing year with countries investing large amounts of physical and human capital into it.

People's adaptation, vulnerability, and responsiveness to climate change is shaped by a myriad of variables. These vary widely from different degrees of exposure and dependency on weather patterns for livelihoods, food security, resources and economic conditions. With 70% of the population living in poverty, women are affected by extreme weather events, grain production loss, casualties, and other repercussions of the climate crisis. Women have far less access to and leverage the services on which they depend.

They still lack opportunities for direct governance and profound impact in politics at all levels. Within the community, women are often exposed to gender-based abuse, coercion, and psychological violence in some situations. As the world struggles with the borderless and multifaceted impacts of climate change, it is crucial that we acknowledge the influence of climate change on women, as well as the significance of their role in combating its challenges. At this critical moment, it is important to address an imperative knowledge gap and highlight why it is crucial to have women's perspectives, experiences, and involvement at all stages of decision-making, adaptation and mitigation.

## **2.0 An Overview of Climate Change and the Emergency to Deal with it**

*“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”*

- Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General 1997-2006 (Unicef, 2006)

The growing risk of vulnerability to climate change is widely discussed in the scientific and political sphere. Climatic change as a result of human practices has scaled to a level where the consequences such as changing weather patterns, rising sea levels, the greater threat of floods and other natural disasters pose a universal threat to human existence. Sustainable development, a need of the hour, faces the biggest challenge in the form of climate change. The burden of this threat is also borne disproportionately by the poorest and most vulnerable. The urgency of the situation compelled the United Nations Development Program to list 17 Sustainable Development Goals, of which Goal 13 iterates the aim to fight climate change with a sustainable plan by 2030. The official goal is to "Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts." With the 2030 deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals approaching, the fight against climate change intensifies each year, with governments pumping resources into achieving them (Goal 13 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

### **2.1 Women’s Economic Status and Vulnerability to Climate Change**

Around 49% of the Indian population comprises women yet their contribution to the GDP of the nation stands at a meagre 17%, which is less than half the global average. (Women in India’s Economic Growth, 2018).

The unparalleled ability to conceive and give birth, to reproduce, gives women remarkable strength and endurance. However, their biological capabilities are not matched with the socio-economic role they play in society. The incidence of poverty is shouldered by them more than their male counterparts such that their socio-economic status is poorest even among the poor. Patriarchal norms confine women to responsibilities in the kitchen or child-bearing and rearing, and do not give them an opportunity to self-develop (Kadam, 2012). With the urgency to empower women in an increasingly developing world, UNDP stated SDG 5 as Gender Equality. The official wording of SDG 5 is “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Through social, political, economic, and health measures, countries around the world are dedicated to materializing real equality among genders by 2030. (United Nations, n.d.)

At the present, however, women continue to face the worst of the worst when it comes to climate change. Alston (2013) argued that climate change impacts women differently. They are more vulnerable to it and the adaptation to the effects of such change are also gendered. Alston puts forward the demand to devise strategies and policies that adhere to this distinction in vulnerability and work towards equitable solutions to the problems faced by women and men. Another viewpoint put forward by Arora-Jonsson (2011) reiterates that women face a greater threat due to climate change in southern countries than men in these countries, and simultaneously, in the northern countries, men contribute more to the rising climatic change than women. Women’s responsibilities with regard to climate change action are often generalised which leads to an increase in what is expected of them without due rewards or recognition. Moreover, the lack of economic security or financial independence pits women against their vulnerability to fight against the demands of society.

## **2.2 Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate how the adaptation to climate change affects human lives, especially that of women, and how women’s economic growth can contribute to fighting climate change.

It aims to address the following questions:

*Is adaptation to climate change gender neutral?*

*How does a gendered perspective integrate into climate change adaptation work?*

*How women’s economic growth can contribute to climate change?*

### **3.0 Facets of Climate Change and their Implications on Women**

#### **3.1 Socio-Political Sphere and Climate Change**

There exists a discourse on the impact of changing climatic conditions on the geo-political sphere with a distinct cascading effect on women. Moosa & Tuana (2014) discussed that a priori power relations underlying our understanding of climate change hampers the formation of holistic adaptation and mitigation efforts, and veil the differential impacts of climate change. The social climate we live in interferes with the manifestations of climate change in several ways, most of which are viewed through a patriarchal lens. Cultural and social norms wherein women play certain “care-taking” roles put them on a pedestal of acting responsibly and shifting the focus from those actually responsible. MacGregor (2010) put forward very eloquently “the masculinization of environmentalism” with great emphasis on the dominance upheld by men in the realm of making policies for climate change. However, in the development of the modern environmental movement, women have been at the helm of driving movements such as the Clayoquot Squad in Canada and the Chipko Movement in India. The social climate of the environmental movement has seen a shift in the 80s and 90s but the political power and decision making have been hijacked by masculine ideologies. As discussed by Arora-Jonsson and initially explained by Leach in 2007, women’s supposed closeness to nature was interpreted by policymakers as opportunities to utilise their labour, skill and knowledge for broader environmental projects which often involved tree plantations, soil conservation among other projects. Quoting Arora-Jonsson, “Success in the projects was secured at the expense of women while new environmental chores were added to their already long list of caring roles.” This economisation of women’s work for environmental benefit was not for their own upliftment.

#### **3.2 Women’s Economic and Social Rights and Climate Change**

Women’s economic dependence on their male counterparts is a patriarchal norm that has been strengthened through centuries of enforcement. With this dependency, their conditions of livelihood are severely impacted in situations that threaten the entire household as their health and safety are not prioritised. Eastin (2018) explained that gender disparities in climate change vulnerability not only reflect pre-existing gender inequalities but reinforce them.

He discussed factors such as inequalities in the ownership and control of household assets, rising familial burdens, declining food and water access, and increased disaster exposure as obstacles in the way of women achieving financial independence, enhancing human capital, and ensuring health and well-being. With their little economic hold in a household, and even lesser in the economy as citizens of a country, women are not equitable in the labour markets and have lesser representation in the decision-making process. Eastin also discussed how climate shocks and disasters play a major role in negatively impacting movements for gender equality as their impacts are detrimental to women's economic and social rights.

### **3.3 Health Risks due to Climate Change**

Climate change affects the health of women through a multitude of dimensions, such as air quality, heat, vector-borne diseases etc. The increasing frequency of extreme heat events and rising average seasonal temperatures lead to increased mortality. Pregnancy also contributes to vulnerability. Extreme exposure to high temperatures is associated with stillbirth, congenital birth defects, and preterm delivery. Poor air quality from the combustion of fossil fuels leads to respiratory problems. Shifting rainfall affects crop, livestock and fishery yields, contributing to food insecurity. Women suffer from malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies. Water scarcity and lack of access to sanitation lead to women travelling long distances to procure water which ultimately creates unsafe conditions for women, especially during reproductive times. To achieve economic growth, accurate accounting of the biological, cultural, and economic factors, which place women at risk for acquiring climate-sensitive water and vector-borne diseases, is of foremost importance. The lack of gender-disaggregated health data restricts conclusive understanding of thresholds of exposure for harm and may result in a lack of awareness by local, national, and even global decision-makers and healthcare personnel (Sorenson, Murray, Lemery, Balbus, 2018).

### **3.4 Climate Change and Trafficking**

During climate change, another key impact and emerging issue are increased cases of trafficking. According to the United Nations, "trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force, for the purpose of exploitation."

During natural disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, and climate-related disasters, such as floods or famine crisis, women are at the greatest risk and most susceptible to trafficking and exploitation. Climate change and disasters disrupt local security and increase levels of stress and mental health issues. These all contribute to anger and violence, especially with women. Women face a greater risk of becoming targets for gender-based violence and trafficking when they are unaccompanied, separated or orphaned, due to the erosion of social controls and protections that normally regulate the behaviour within households and societies. Women, who become the target of trafficking often find themselves in a variety of forced work engaged in agricultural and construction work and other labour-intensive jobs. The greatest number of missing women are trafficked to Mumbai, India, where 38% of such girls and women (average age 16 years) are found to be infected with HIV/AIDS (Silverman *et al.*, 2007; Gupta *et al.*, 2008).

#### **4.0 Indian Policy Frameworks**

India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), adopted in June 2008, is the country's domestic policy and incorporates India's vision of ecologically sustainable development and steps to be taken to implement it. The NAPCC acknowledged that Climate Change and Energy Security were two sides of the same coin; that India had to make a strategic shift from its current reliance on fossil fuels to a pattern of economic activity based progressively on renewable sources of energy such as solar energy and cleaner sources such as nuclear energy. Such a shift would enhance India's energy security and contribute to dealing with the threat of Climate Change. The NAPCC recognizes that it is intimately linked to the parallel multilateral effort, based on the principles and provisions of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), to establish a global Climate Change regime. It was India's hope that the ongoing multilateral negotiations under the UNFCCC would yield an agreed outcome, based on the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibility and Respective Capabilities (CDRRC), which would enable developing countries like India, through international financial support and technology transfer, to accelerate its shift towards a future of renewable and clean energy.

India's Intended Nationally Determined Commitments (INDC) submitted to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on October 2, 2015. It links India's commitment to ecologically sustainable economic development with its age-old civilizational values of respecting Nature, incorporating a sense of intergenerational equity and common humanity. The targets India has voluntarily committed itself to are unprecedented for a developing country. The energy intensity of India's growth will decline by 33-35% by 2030 compared to the 2005 base year, which means that for every additional dollar of GDP India will be using progressively and significantly lesser amounts of energy.

The International Solar Alliance (ISA) was announced by Hon'ble Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and H.E. Mr Francois Hollande, former Hon'ble President of France on 30th November 2015, is a treaty-based inter-governmental organization working to create a global market system to tap the benefits of solar power and promote clean energy applications. (International Solar Alliance | Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, Government of India, 2015). This initiative is a bright step towards better energy usage in a safe, convenient, affordable, equitable and sustainable manner and reducing dependence on non-renewable energy, thus promoting the common and shared goal of meeting the energy demands of a secure & sustainable world. The ISA has 122 sun-belt countries that lie between the two tropics as its prospective member countries and currently has 86 signatory countries in this global collective.

## **5.0 Case Studies of Local Solutions and Movements**

### **5.1 Solar Mamas - Barefoot College**

In a village called Tilonia, 110 km away from Jaipur, Barefoot College teaches rural women how to fabricate solar panels, lights, and photovoltaic circuits. With this knowledge, these women who are then accredited "Solar Mamas" return to light their own communities. Most of these women are married and illiterate. These Solar Mamas are Barefoot College's most impactful graduates and have illuminated over 1200 villages worldwide. Barefoot College was set up by Sanjit Roy in 1972 with a thought in mind that "it is time we focus on women" and uses methods that work towards 14 out of the 17 SDGs.

Additionally, Solar Mamas experience a substantial increase in their income following their time at Barefoot College, offering a further source of empowerment and confidence boost. This model presents a brilliant example of women's power and resourcefulness. Their education and knowledge can be put to great use when effectively harvested.

## **5.2 Hariyali Project and SEWA**

In 2008, in the rural areas where the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was well established and working towards women's economic growth and financial stability, about 40% of the income was being spent on energy sources for domestic and work-related consumption. Other factors such as frequent power outages and heavy dependence on diesel presented themselves as barriers in the way of women's economic independence and improved livelihoods. As a result of this analysis, SEWA designed and implemented the Hariyali Project. This model aims at building communities that are self-sufficient in terms of energy production and consumption, by providing them with sustainable and clean energy technologies that allow families to considerably cut energy-related costs (both domestic and work-related), as well as with tailored loan products that allow families to become owners of such technologies in a few years' time. SEWA and the Hariyali project helped women farmers become part of the entire energy value chain as owner-managers. Ownership of income-generating assets by women, such as the solar pumps, ensured that they have a voice and a say in the decision-making process of their families and communities. As of 2016, 21000 solar lamps, 3040 LPG stoves, and 232 solar pumps had been purchased by SEWA members through Hariyali loans, with more than 135000 people have benefited from the activities of the campaign (Benni & Barktaky, 2018).

## **5.3 Water Harvesting in Gujarat, SEWA**

A severe impact of climate change has been a reduction in freshwater availability. As women are the breadmakers of a household, their responsibility to fetch water from wells and other water sources has forced them to walk kilometres to fetch water, with the distance increasing as the years go by. Not only that, the supply of water tankers often leads to quarrels and arguments among the women, with no possible solution in mind.

In a drastic situation like this, SEWA in Gujarat came up with effective solutions that save women their time and energy, and enable them to work in other fields without most of their time being spent in bringing water to their homes. Initiated on the demand of rural women in Gujarat, the promotion of rainwater harvesting is a major initiative of SEWA's water campaign. Women at the grassroots level play a leading role in disseminating information about and gaining local acceptance of roof rainwater harvesting technology as an alternative to more centralised water supply systems such as piped water supply. By 2002, SEWA had constructed 1533 individual and 40 community roof rainwater harvesting structures. As a result of this growing installation and acceptance of rainwater harvesting, women have benefited in terms of increased income, reduced drudgery, improvements in the livelihoods of their families, reduced migration of both women and men and increased participation in SEWA's other programs (Panda, 2006).

#### **5.4 Women at the front of the Climate Change Battle**

Women have been at the forefront of the climate change battle for many decades, and with growing autonomy and independence, they have been consistently working towards environmental causes. Numerous women in India have taken the reins to advance these causes. Some of the prominent women that combine environmental causes with women empowerment include:

**5.4.1 Vandana Shiva:** A renowned book author and widely popular "Ecofeminist", Shiva presents a viewpoint on the destruction of ecology and its direct impact on everyday life, with most of the consequences being borne by women. She raised questions on patriarchal oppression and the destruction of nature in the name of progress and profit, and how women can counter the violence inherent in these processes (Mies & Shiva, 1993).

**5.4.2 Sunita Narain:** Narain is an Indian Environmentalist, political activist and a major proponent of the Green concept of Sustainable Development. Narain brings to the discourse the argument that developing nations such as India do not contribute as much to global warming as the developed nations of the west. However, this inequality does not put them in a position to abuse their resources. Their energy resources must be consumed sustainably and ecologically.

## **5.0 Viewpoints in accordance with Reports of Various Companies and Organisations**

### **5.1 McKinsey**

Gender inequality is not just a social issue but is also an economic challenge. If women—who account for half the world’s working-age population, do not achieve their full economic potential, the global economy will suffer (Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, n.d.).

In September 2015, MGI published a global report titled “The power of parity: How advancing gender equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth.” Advancing gender equality can lead to prosperity and economic growth. If the gender gaps in society are not addressed, the maximum economic potential of women will not be achieved. According to McKinsey, in a “full potential” scenario in which women play an identical role in labour markets to men, as much as \$28 trillion, or 26%, could be added to global annual GDP by 2025. (Woetzel et al., 2020). The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that an annual investment of \$2.5 trillion is needed in the energy system alone until 2035 to limit temperature rise to below 1.5 °C from pre-industrial levels, that is around 2.5% of the world’s economy. (Nature Editorial, n.d.-b) An increase in participation of women in the primary, secondary and tertiary sector would lead to the growth of GDP thus, increasing funds to fight climate change.

### **5.2 Report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security**

“Women are also powerful agents of change, and they can effectively contribute to curbing the impacts of climate change. Women's knowledge and responsibilities can be critical to community survival.” -H.E. Tarja Halonen, former President of Finland (The President of the Republic of Finland: Speeches and Interviews, 2008).

In an effort to derive the interdependence of women and climate change, a part of this report covers various issues, facts, impacts and studies of scholars and students but their practical applicability is still far from reach. It not only states how women are affected by climate change but also how they serve as an agent of adaptation to climate change. For example, it talks about how water scarcity during climate change leads to disturbance in the agricultural work of women in Africa and how it affects their health, sanitation, education etc.

Solutions designed to slow down and mitigate the effects of climate change also offer critical opportunities for job creation, which can help women move forward in industries and occupations to which they may have previously lacked access. (Women and Climate Change, 2017). The inclusion of women at higher posts in decision making related to climate change is necessary, but not sufficient. Women should be posted at national levels so that they can enhance efficiencies of climate change policies.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

Climate change and its impact on women is a global crisis that manifests itself in a variety of ways, requiring solutions from different groups and communities at different levels.

- 1) **Prioritize Education:** Investment in education and skill-building among women will strengthen leadership qualities and improve knowledge. Education in the field of policymaking. Health and economic impacts on climate change are needed to achieve sustainable goals.
- 2) **Men's Participation:** Men have a crucial role in promoting women's economic rights and equality, including access to employment, appropriate working atmosphere, control of economic resources and full participation in decision-making. Male leaders in government institutions, the corporate sector, non-governmental organizations etc., can provide positive role models on gender equality by introducing anti-discrimination measures, employment practices, unbiased decision making etc.
- 3) **Support from the Private Sector:** Establish partnerships with NGOs and NPOs to support programming that engages with local women and combat the effects of climate change. They should also invest in initiatives that create job opportunities for women in small economies that also support climate change mitigation.
- 4) **Role of the National Government:** States should address the impacts of climate change on women and provide them with various resources such as equal access to support, control and distribution of benefits among men and women. Implementation of disaster risk reduction programs to lessen the impacts of natural hazards is of utmost importance.
- 5) **Improving Public Health Surveillance and Solutions:** There is a need to improve the data collection techniques related to the healthcare of women, especially in low-middle income countries.

Data that show a clear picture of the health impacts of climate change on women provide a better understanding of gender-climate-health associations. These associations and organisations should look into this and should take steps to improve healthcare facilities like water supply and sanitation.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

*“It’s not enough to have women at the table and then hope that effects trickle down to the grassroots. Empowering the middle is critical, and connecting the international, national, and local is inseparable to creating change.”*

- Eleanor Blomstrom, Women’s Environment and Development Organization

Low-middle income countries, such as India, have significant social, geographic, and environmental realities that make all citizens, but especially women, vulnerable to climate change. Adaptation to climate change cannot be considered gender-neutral.

Gender inequality prevails in our country on an enormous scale. Inequality is evident from the fact that ownership of land and property is large with men. However, women are not just victims, but also saviours of change in environmental crisis and attainment of sustainable goals. While gender has been increasingly factored into climate policy, progress has still been slow in India to reduce gender-based disparities and to involve women in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and disaster risk reduction. Local solutions are a starting point for implementation, but in order for such solutions to have a notable impact on future climate scenarios, scaling them up is essential. The Self Help Groups (SHGs) that are spread all over the country provide another big platform for implementing policies on the environment. While global environmental policies and projects reflect this change, in India, an unbiased gender perspective still does not inform policy in meaningful ways. Policies that claim to be gender-neutral are discriminatory because they fail to take into consideration the different ways in which men and women experience the effects of climate change and its adaptation. Integrating a gender-responsive approach into policy-making on climate change requires research, expertise in economic fields, targeting resources and monitoring results. Women can be key agents in the move towards a more sustainable future and policymakers need to realise this. With the help of women, so many local solutions are initiated to fight various problems, there is a consequent increase in women's economic hold, confidence, and ability to stand for their rights.

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