



THINK PIECE

# Gender and Climate Change in the Context of COVID-19





Photo: @ UN Women/ Mohammad Rakibul Hasan

## I. Introduction

2020 was intended to be a pivotal year for the global gender equality agenda and global climate change ambition. It was supposed to be a year to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and to celebrate the start of the Paris Agreement. Yet, the unexpected and rapid spread of the highly infectious novel coronavirus has set in our paths a mammoth challenge. The ensuing economic slowdown and the postponement of the UN Climate Conference to 2021 threaten to stall the world's commitments to climate action. However, this is also an opportunity to better understand the links between pandemics such as COVID-19 and climate change and ensure that we rebuild from this crisis inclusively, equitably and sustainably.

**“Greenhouse gases,  
just like viruses, do  
not respect national  
boundaries.”**

United Nations Secretary-General  
António Guterres

## 2. Links and differentiated impacts of climate change and COVID-19 on public health

Asia and the Pacific is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to climate change and climate-induced natural disasters. During what is usually a time of the year spent preparing for the wet season and annual floods, the region now, like other parts of the world, is struggling to respond to the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. At the time of writing, there were over 190,000 cases and over 7,780 confirmed deaths in the region (according to the World Health Organization (WHO) as of 27 April 2020).<sup>1</sup>

**The spread of COVID-19 multiplies threats to thousands of people in the region, where the impact of climate change on health and well-being is already significant.**

The toll of climate change on people's lives in the long term is estimated to exceed the impact of the deadly virus. According to WHO, between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year.<sup>2</sup>

The common health risks triggered by climate change include heat stress and injury or death from extreme weather events. Furthermore, as temperatures are rising, vector-borne diseases, like malaria and dengue, are exhibiting greater shifts in their geographical occurrences and transmission. Global warming is also leading to increases in cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Also, indirect health impacts, such as malnutrition, undernutrition and diarrhea, are caused by slow-onset environmental crises, such as diminishing food security, ecosystem degradation and droughts, in addition to disasters breaking down supply chains for medicines and medical equipment.<sup>3</sup>

Climate change disproportionately affects the health of women and girls. According to studies by WHO, pregnant women face poorer maternal health due to risks brought about by climate change.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the absence of clean water makes menstrual hygiene management a great burden for women and girls and can lead to health complications and other unintended consequences like school dropouts. Due to droughts, rural women and girls spend more time fetching water and walking longer distances which affects not only their physical health, but also increases risk of violence.

Rural women in particular are held back by restricting discriminatory social norms and face greater challenges, including poorer nutrition, and in the absence of clean fuel, they suffer from staggering levels of indoor air pollution and subsequent respiratory illnesses. In the case of extreme weather events, lack of information and poor preparedness lead to greater loss of life, exploitation and gender-based violence in addition to affecting the economic livelihoods of millions of women and girls.

As the world is struggling to cope with the impacts of the pandemic, we should be mindful of the fact that tackling drivers of climate change presents one of the biggest opportunities for improving public health according to the findings of the Lancet Commission.<sup>5</sup> If anything, the COVID-19 crisis has opened our eyes to how connected climate change is to public health in terms of short-term impacts and greater potential future risk of similar viruses. Proactive responses to climate change can affect public health outcomes in significant ways, including the health of the women and girls.

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1. World Health Organization (WHO). Coronavirus disease update 2019. Situation report 98. Available at: <https://bit.ly/35GRX2r>

2. WHO. Climate change and health. News published on 1 February 2018. Available at <https://bit.ly/2L9BDy3>

3. WHO. Climate change and health. News published on 1 February 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2L9BDy3>

4. WHO (2014). Gender, climate change and health. Available at: <https://bit.ly/35FRgXn>

5. The Lancet Commission (2015). Health and climate change: policy responses to public health. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fvmkxv>

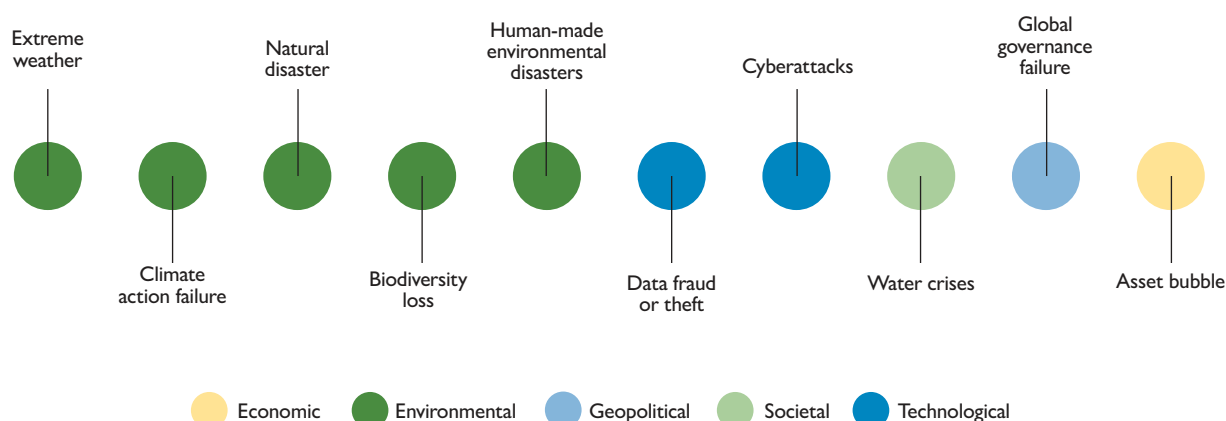
### 3. Climate change remains the top global risk factor

Before the COVID-19 spread was pronounced a pandemic, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks report placed climate-related risks at the top of 10 global threats (see figure 1).<sup>7</sup> The report warns that leaders cannot systemically address threats like the climate or biodiversity crises without paying urgent attention to repairing societal divisions and driving sustainable economic growth. This argument can also be made for dealing with the current crisis: linkages between the global climate change agenda and promotion of social inclusion and gender equality should become an integrated course of action in the COVID-19 recovery period.

**“As a society, we are only as safe as our most vulnerable people: all of us are vulnerable to virus which takes us into a space of solidarity. That is exactly the thinking we need to deal with climate change.”**

Christiana Figueres,  
Former Executive Secretary, UNFCCC<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1. Top 10 global risks by likelihood**



Source: World Economic Forum (2020). Global risks report 2020. 15th edition.  
Available at: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Risk\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf)

6. Figueres C., Five Lessons from coronavirus that will help us tackle climate change. Article published on 24 March 2020.  
Available at: <https://time.com/5808809/coronavirus-climate-action/>

7. World Economic Forum (2020). Global risks report 2020. 15th edition. Available at: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Risk\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf)



## 4. Building links between climate action and sustainable recovery from COVID-19

The current focus of attention of all governments is on fighting the pandemic and mitigating its immediate socio-economic consequences. However, soon the focus will shift from response to recovery.

Now is the time to begin planning and preparing to rebuild economies and bring back renewed, sustainable

progress and prosperity. While doing so, governments should build the bridge between fighting COVID-19 and not losing sight of persisting climate change impacts and ecological destruction and available climate mitigation and adaptation and nature-based solutions, while upholding critical gender equality and social justice commitments (see Box 1).

### Box 1. Greenhouse gas emissions could be higher than before COVID-19

Satellite images show dramatic drops in air pollution in coronavirus hotspots. But they are also a graphic reminder of the climate crisis that will continue when the pandemic passes. When the lockdowns are lifted and life returns to what it once was, so too will the pollution that clouds the skies and with it, greenhouse gases that fuel global warming.

We have seen such temporary climate wins before.

In the initial aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production decreased by 1.4%, only to rise by 5.9% in 2010. This time the crisis could have a long-term impact on the environment — at far greater cost to human health, security, and life — if it derails global efforts to address climate change.

Source: Wilkinson, D. and Téllez Chávez, L. How COVID-19 could impact climate crisis. Article published on 16 April 2020. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/how-covid-19-could-impact-climate-crisis>

Many climate solutions can bring social co-benefits which can be enjoyed by all. We can curb air pollution, improve air quality and bring down respiratory illnesses through decarbonization of economy, phasing out coal and prioritizing renewable energy. We can help poor and vulnerable populations contended with health challenges by investing in ecosystem-based adaptation and sustainable forest management. Climate-smart agriculture and climate-

resilient food systems will pay rich dividends in curbing non-communicable diseases. Ensuring that clean desalinated water and sanitation is available to communities through climate-resilient technology will also be critical to prevent health risks. Furthermore, protecting ecosystems and species from illegal trade can help curb the spread of zoonotic viruses and micro-organisms that can cause a number of deadly diseases (see box 2 over page).

## Box 2. COVID-19 is not only a global human health crisis but an environmental and animal welfare crisis too

Recent studies show that the links between climate change, ecosystem degradation and public health are increasingly becoming direct, intricate and complex. COVID-19 is believed to have originated from wildlife at wet markets, where wild animals are sold alive and sometimes illegally. Such markets exist across Asia and in some other parts of the world with often inadequate animal welfare regulations or poor enforcement of such regulations.

COVID-19 is not the first epidemic caused by disregard for animal welfare and ecosystems. Ebola, SARS, Avian flu, MERS and Zika are also examples of such deadly zoonotic diseases. And with the increasing destruction of natural habitat the risk of further and more serious epidemics is rising.

Loss of ecosystems and habitats due to intensified agricultural and livestock rearing, allow new forms

of pathogens to thrive, that are far more deadly and resistant. Spread of deadly zoonotic viruses, transmitted from animals to humans, is a by-product of climate change, as their transmission is often triggered by change in climatic patterns, flooding and famines. Ecosystem degradation makes wildlife cross the animal-human barrier and leads to spread of viruses.

It is now more imperative than ever that governments improve and enforce animal welfare and wildlife legislation and ecosystem protection in order to protect human health. It is necessary to ensure wildlife is given the opportunity to remain “wild”, away from persistent human encroachment. Consumers should be aware of animal welfare implications on human health. A fundamental shift is required in the way animal welfare and trade are treated, if we want to avoid future tragedies, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sources: World organization for animal health, information on COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019-novel-coronavirus/>. UN Environment Programme (2019). Frontiers 2016: Emerging issues of environmental concern. Available at: [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7664/Frontiers\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7664/Frontiers_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

The COVID-19 crisis has reminded us that responses to global problems need to be founded on sustainability and inclusivity. Therefore, while designing the recovery, we need to ensure that a sustainable response provides benefits to all – women, men, girls, boys, vulnerable, marginalized, those living with disabilities, aging population and others. As we build back from this crisis, we must aim to build back better for all and in a climate-resilient way.

The COVID-19 crisis further highlights how important it is to empower local economies to be climate resilient. Improving sustainability of livelihoods is essential for effective and inclusive recovery. In the long run, the environment and the community cannot afford setbacks that have detrimental effects on our health, biodiversity and livelihoods.

**“As the engines of growth begin to rev up again, we need to see how prudent management of nature can be part of this “different economy” that must emerge, one where finance and actions fuel green jobs, green growth and a different way of life, because the health of people and the health of planet are one and the same, and both can thrive in equal measure.”**

Inger Andersen,  
UN Under-Secretary-General  
and Executive Director,  
UN Environment Programme<sup>8</sup>

8. UN News. Climate change. First Person: COVID-19 is not a silver lining for the climate, says UN Environment chief. Article published on 5 April 2020. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>

## 5. Sustainability of women's livelihoods is key to prosperity

Current data on the COVID-19 impact show that people's exposure to the virus varies with factors, such as place of residence, income and gender. This pandemic is not just a health crisis; it is also a social and economic crisis, and women and men are affected in different ways. Many of the broader economic repercussions affect women more severely than men.

COVID-19 adds economic pressures on our society, which are complementary to existing structural barriers, discriminatory social norms and gender inequalities that are exacerbated by climate change. COVID-19 and ensuing mitigation measures ultimately affect women's income generation and job security. In the frontlines of both battles are health professionals, of which 70% are women<sup>9</sup> and whose occupational health is currently being compromised.

In terms of income generation, women in Asia and the Pacific have higher dependency on direct service jobs and informal work. As many direct service jobs cannot be done remotely, women are vulnerable to losing their jobs. Latest data illustrates that a greater share of men than women work in tele-commutable or critical occupations, suggesting that women are more exposed to unemployment risk during this crisis than in past recessions.<sup>11</sup> Being forced to stay at home, due to work-from-home modalities or loss of job, may increase the risk of domestic violence for women.<sup>12</sup> It has been reported by many sources that women and girls face an increasing trend of domestic violence in the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>13</sup>

**“One thing is clear about the COVID-19 pandemic, as stock markets tumble, schools and universities close, people stockpile supplies and home becomes a different and crowded space: this is not just a health issue. It is a profound shock to our societies and economies, exposing the deficiencies of public and private arrangements that currently function only if women play multiple and underpaid roles.”**

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,  
Under-Secretary-General and  
Executive Director, UN Women<sup>10</sup>

Overall, in developing countries more women than men are involved in informal economy, which has been significantly affected by the lockdown measures. Women working in informal sectors are more often exposed to vulnerable situations, for instance, as domestic workers, home-based workers or contributing family workers.<sup>14</sup> In Asia and the Pacific, where approximately 60% of labor force is involved in informal economy.<sup>15</sup>

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9. Boniol M, Mclsaac M, Xu L, Wuliji T, Diallo K, Campbell J. (2019). Gender equity in the health workforce: analysis of 104 countries. Working paper 1. Geneva: WHO. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf>
  10. United Nations. COVID-19: Women front and centre. Statement by Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director. Article published on 29 March 2020. Available at: <https://egypt.un.org/en/39346-covid-19-women-front-and-centrestatement-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka-un-under-secretary-general>
  11. Alon T., Doepke M., Olmstead-Rumsey J., Tertilt M. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on gender equality. Article published on 19 April 2020. Available at: <https://voxeu.org/article/impact-coronavirus-pandemic-gender-equality>
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COVID-19 and its mitigation measures threaten women's engagement in economic activities and exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Women are hit harder by the economic impacts of COVID-19 because women are more likely than men to be working in low-paying informal jobs and in the direct service sector. In addition, COVID-19 contributes to the increase in women's care burden.

Measures, such as quarantines, travel restrictions and lockdowns of cities, have altered supply and demand for products and services. While supply chains have been disrupted throughout the informal and formal economy, it is small and medium enterprises, the self-employed and daily wage earners are taking the biggest hit to their livelihoods.<sup>16</sup> This is particularly the case in South Asia, where self-employment or micro-enterprises account for over 80% of employment<sup>17</sup>

A similar pattern is prevalent with impacts of climate change. Climate change affects all of us, but the impacts are felt hardest by those who are involved in vulnerable livelihood sectors or are otherwise out of the safety nets provided by formal work arrangements, such as sick pay and health insurance. Informal workers, such as waste pickers, street vendors and home-based workers (many of who are women), are in many ways in the frontlines of climate action: by recycling waste, using less energy and materials and enhancing local markets. Their impact on the environment and climate remains modest compared to their counterparts involved in formal economy.

In the current COVID-19 situation, informal workers are increasingly vulnerable to income losses because the demand pattern for their services may change and the supply chains, which they depend on, may suffer from disruption.

16. United Nations (2020). Shared responsibility, global solidarity: responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. March 2020. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>

17. ILO. News section: Employment creation: small businesses and self-employed provide most jobs worldwide and in Asia. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_723553/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_723553/lang--en/index.htm)

## 6. Green jobs for women in economic sectors impacted by COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Asia and the Pacific region was seen as a leading region in the creation of green jobs<sup>18</sup> supported through various investment instruments, stimulus packages and policy reforms aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and principles of green economy.<sup>19</sup> Efforts were made to encourage women's participation in parts of the green economy with historically limited female representation. However, due to pre-existing gender inequalities there has been concern that green investments may not necessarily guarantee equal access to green jobs for women, nor provide the services and key resources that might position them effectively for green job opportunities.

There is strong evidence to make a case for why gender equality matters for effective greening of economies. Though the list is not exhaustive, evidence has shown that there are significant gender-based differences in: social and economic development; consumption patterns; aspirations; access and use of knowledge; approach to environmental issues; ecological footprints; use, access and control of environmental resources; and management of the environment.<sup>20</sup> Women tend to have smaller ecological footprints than men and engage in more sustainable behaviours.

Engagement of women in green sectors can bring additional economic gains. For example, Asia and the Pacific reportedly loses USD 42 billion to USD 47 billion annually as a region because of women's limited access to employment opportunities.<sup>21</sup> To make a transformative change in green economy more women should be engaged in green jobs. For that to happen, providing access for women to any economic incentives or relief should be prioritized.

Now due to the impacts of COVID-19, the reality in many green economy sectors may change, as many of the sectors where women constituted a significant share of labour force have been affected by the financial recession. In developing countries women are also more represented in natural resources use, agriculture and other climate-sensitive sectors. Agriculture remained the most prominent employer of women in Asia. In the Pacific islands and South Asia, the concentration of employed women in agriculture is especially heavy.<sup>22</sup>

Green economy can both create jobs and prevent job losses. As a response to climate change, the creation of green jobs should provide inclusive and decent employment opportunities, advance efficient use of resources and contribute to building low-carbon societies.

Green jobs and women's access to them should remain at the center of the COVID-19 recovery. Focusing on the creation of green jobs as a means for long-term recovery from COVID-19 can accumulate multiple socio-economic benefits and help countries in their work towards SDGs.<sup>23</sup>

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18. ILO (2018a). World employment and social outlook 2018: Greening with jobs. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YIGxK9>

19. Green economy includes six main sectors: renewable energy, green buildings, sustainable transport, water management, waste management and land management.

20. UN Women (2013). A transformative stand-alone goal on achieving gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment: Imperatives and key components. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3djiqpA>

21. ILO and ADB (2011). Women and labour markets in Asia—Rebalancing for Gender Equality. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WdsXwR>

22. ILO and Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2011). Women and labour markets in Asia—Rebalancing for Gender Equality. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28620/women-labor-markets.pdf>

23. ILO (2018). The employment impact of climate change adaptation. Input document for the G-20 climate sustainability working group. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_645572.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_645572.pdf)



Photo: @ UN Women/ Piyavit Thongsa-Ard

## 7. Impacts on women engaged in climate change adaptation sectors

Women are disproportionately affected by climate change due to inadequate and unequal access to essential resources, such as land, water, energy, finance, information and technology; and women's reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods make them extremely vulnerable to climate change and undermines their capacity to adapt. Discriminatory gendered social norms make it more difficult for women to prevent and respond to climate change and COVID-19. All of this makes many women in Asia and the Pacific extremely vulnerable to climate change and undermines their capacity to adapt to double pressures associated with climate change and COVID-19 and their ability to generate income and secure food and nutrition.

Dependency on climate-sensitive livelihoods affects women's economic opportunities as climate change progresses. Besides this, due to the COVID-19 impacts, women engaged in climate-sensitive sectors, such as tourism and agriculture, have experienced new types of pressure.

Travel restrictions and lockdowns significantly affected the tourism sector, where more women than men are employed. It is estimated that the tourism sector will decrease its output up to 70%, putting many women in vulnerable positions.<sup>24</sup> According to the Global Report on Women in Tourism, the majority of tourism sector workforce worldwide is female. Namely, 54% of people employed in tourism are women compared to 39% in the broader economy.<sup>25</sup>

24. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020). Information on COVID-19 global efforts. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/> (accessed on 18 April 2020).

25. World Tourism Organization (2019). Global report on women in tourism – Second edition. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420384>

Agriculture is vulnerable to climate impacts, but it also causes one-fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions. It is the foundation for the livelihoods, food security and nutrition of a significant proportion of developing country populations, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. Women engaged in this sector suffer from underlying gender inequalities and discriminatory policies. Nearly 58% of female labour force in Asia and the Pacific work in agriculture, and only around a fifth of them hold secure tenure to land, putting them in a disadvantaged position compared to men due to restricted

land ownership rights, in addition to their vulnerability to the effects of environmental degradation (see Box 3).

Women farmers also have less access than men to agricultural inputs, financing, water and energy, appropriate infrastructure, technologies and agricultural extension services.<sup>26</sup> Women vendors and farmers in the Pacific have already reported reductions in income due to COVID-19 implying that the existing inequalities are weakening their position during the ongoing crisis.<sup>27</sup>

### **Box 3. Women farmers and market vendors suffering from climate change are highly vulnerable during COVID-19**

Farmers and market vendors, who are already at the margins of the society, may not have the capacities to cope with abrupt external shocks caused by COVID-19. Demand for food is always relatively inelastic. But during hard times, loss of income may influence food consumption and dietary patterns in poor households. Disruptions in logistics and supply chains can influence food availability and supply, thereby influencing farmers' and market vendors' income during disasters.

Mitigation measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic can intensify the challenges faced by women smallholder farmers in accessing ingredients and markets. The demand pattern for food changes due to COVID-19. To avoid social contact people alter their food-related behavior. To make up for the changes in demand and disruptions in logistics and supply chains farmers may have to sell their productive assets or find new ways to accommodate for the changing demand.

Sources: World Food Programme (2020). Gender office. Gender and COVID-19. Available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000113724/download/>  
Food and Agriculture Organisation (2020). COVID-19 and smallholder producers' access to markets. Rome. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8657en>

26. UN Women (2016). Leveraging co-benefits between gender equality and climate action for sustainable development: mainstreaming gender considerations in climate change projects. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WdAifJ>

27. UN Women (2020). The first 100 days of COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: a gender lens. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2yB6hNS>

## 8. Impacts on women engaged in the energy sector

The energy sector – responsible for almost two thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions – presents enormous challenges for the future of the planet. Residential solid fuel burning accounts for 25% of global black carbon emissions, with about 84% emanating from the global South.

Accessing modern energy services is a major livelihood challenge for the poorest people in Asia.<sup>28</sup> Areas without electric power also suffer from the “feminization of poverty”. Energy poverty is still pervasive – nearly 75% of those in energy poverty are women. One in five people in South Asia do not have access to electricity, and close to 3 billion people (40% of the global population)<sup>29</sup> burn solid fuels such as wood, charcoal, animal waste or crop residues in open fires or inefficient stoves for their daily cooking and heating. Women are the bulk of these 3 billion humans that still use traditional biomass as their main source of energy.

Energy poverty disproportionately hurts women and children, who are forced to spend up to 20 hours a week gathering biomass and drinking water and while doing so, being vulnerable to robbery, violence and rape, instead of going to school, learning and bettering their situation.<sup>30</sup>

Many of these challenges could be solved through the use of decentralized renewable and efficient energy-related technologies, which make a major economic and social difference to many rural women in helping them increase their incomes and improve their living standards and health.

Many see the efforts to contain the economic fallout of COVID-19 as an opportunity to accelerate the shift to cleaner energy alternatives, such as solar and wind. Distributed renewable energy plays an important role in the global efforts to contain the virus spread, specifically in Asia and Sub-Saharan regions, where access to un-interrupted supply of electricity is still a challenge.

A lack of access to electricity has the potential to magnify the human catastrophe and significantly slow down global recovery. Energy poverty has left more than 1 billion people in developing countries without access to proper healthcare. According to WHO, a woman dies every minute from complications related to pregnancy or child birth, often due to a lack of electricity and inadequate lighting. The ability for doctors and health workers to treat infected populations is based on the assumption that clinics and medical equipment are fully functioning with access to sufficient, uninterrupted and reliable electricity. Even when treatment becomes available, the lack of a cold chain and appropriate refrigeration would mean that vulnerable populations may not have access to properly stored vaccine and medication.

Besides electricity, a lack of access to clean cooking amplifies the vulnerability of women and of communities at large. Recent studies suggest that people exposed to air pollution are more likely to die from COVID-19 than people living in areas with cleaner air.<sup>32</sup> This makes communities (specifically women) using inefficient polluting cook stoves much more vulnerable to COVID-19.

This issue is as important as never before. There are concerns that the current economic slowdown could lead to a return to using firewood or other polluting cooking methods among households that have earlier already transitioned to using cleaner cooking fuels, like electricity, liquefied petroleum gas or ethanol. In turn, such return to the unsustainable past in terms of energy supply could mean negative impacts on women's livelihoods and health.

In the case of the pandemic, faster deployment of climate-friendly solutions is extremely critical to save lives. Deployment of distributed renewable energy systems (which can be done rapidly) can increase access to health facilities as well as provide cleaner air to households. These energy solutions can not only save lives and reduce communities' vulnerability but can also support survival of women-led businesses relying on distributed renewable energy in the post-COVID-19 future.

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28. Ramanathan, V. and Carmichael, G. Global and regional climate changes due to black carbon. *Nature Geoscience* 1 (2008), pp. 221–227. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/ngeo156>

29. United Nations. Sustainable Energy for All: A Vision Statement by Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations, November 2011. Available at: [https://www.seforall.org/sites/default/files/gather-content/SG\\_Sustainable\\_Energy\\_for\\_All\\_vision.pdf](https://www.seforall.org/sites/default/files/gather-content/SG_Sustainable_Energy_for_All_vision.pdf)

30. United Nations Development Programme and Global Climate Change Alliance (2016). Policy brief. Gender and climate change. Gender and sustainable energy. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2SHXvEI>

31. WHO (2004). Stopping the invisible epidemic of maternal deaths. News section. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fuQ2uo>

32. Carrington D. Air pollution linked to far higher Covid-19 death rates, study finds. Article published on 7 April 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3doivZ9>

## 9. Recommendations for action to ensure climate resilient post-COVID-19 recovery

### Action by state actors

The pandemic is not yet over, but it is already clear that when it is, governments will face a transformed landscape of priorities, needs, vulnerabilities and impacts. Radical interventions will be needed to jumpstart economies, prevent structural damage, and build better resilience for all. Economic recovery and resilience must integrate more forward-looking sustainable, environmentally ambitious and socially inclusive approaches.

Much needs to be done immediately, but governments should withstand the temptation of short-term solutions in response to the present crisis and remain resolved to implement their Paris Agreement and international environment commitments. Longer-term recovery policies should not make the climate and biodiversity crises worse.

**“ Everything we do during and after the COVID-19 crisis must aim to build more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change, and the many other global challenges we face.”**

United Nations Secretary-General  
António Guterres<sup>33</sup>

### Box 4. Six climate-related actions to shape the recovery and the work ahead proposed by the UN Secretary-General

1. As we spend huge amounts of money to recover from the coronavirus, we must deliver new jobs and businesses through a clean, green transition.
2. Where taxpayers' money is used to rescue businesses, it needs to be tied to achieving green jobs and sustainable growth.
3. Fiscal firepower must drive a shift from grey to green economy and make societies and people more resilient.
4. Public funds should be used to invest in the future, not the past, and flow to sustainable sectors and projects that help the environment and the climate. Fossil fuel subsidies must end, and polluters must start paying for their pollution.
5. Climate risks and opportunities must be incorporated into the financial system as well as all aspects of public policy making and infrastructure.
6. We need to work together as an international community.

Source: The UN Secretary-general. Remarks on International Mother Earth Day. New York, 22 April 2020.  
Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/earth-day>

33. UN SG Policy brief (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on women. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3beYcvl>

**1. Re-think risk of climate change:** In the post-COVID-19 world, response to climate crisis should remain a paramount priority on the political agenda and governments should be better prepared for the disruptions brought by climate change that pose a major threat to human lives and require a comprehensive and transformative response. While recovering, governments should build in social and environmental protection elements into political processes and institutional arrangements critical for climate action. Complex and siloed coordination of national climate change policies and Nationally Determined Contributions processes, where integration of gender remains limited, superficial or lacks consistency should be addressed and not remain a barrier for inclusive, sustainable growth.

**2. Support gender-responsive, risk-informed and interconnected prevention and preparedness systems:** Under the COVID-19 crisis, risk-informed prevention and preparedness are essential to understand multiple threats and complex risks, as well as opportunities. Given the fact that women and girls are more vulnerable to disasters including COVID-19, risk-informed prevention and preparedness should identify and address drivers of risks and exposure to various shocks and stresses through the gender lenses. Governments need to involve other stakeholders, such as civil society, private sector and scientific and research institutes, to share information and resources as well as ensuring their proactive commitments to reduce risks.

**3. Support multilateralism and global perspectives:** The truly global nature of the COVID-19 crisis is forcing us to recognize that in the times of national protectionist actions, global solidarity is essential, and the global perspective can help build a momentum for strong inclusive and just climate action. 2020 was supposed to be a pivotal year to address climate change, as countries were expected to introduce revamped plans to meet the emission reduction goals established under the 2015 Paris Agreement. As the global meeting of heads of states is postponed till 2021, the need to mobilize governments to act on climate has never been more urgent. 2020 is also a year to celebrate the achievements of 25 years of implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action. The progress is significant, but the gender gap still remains in women's political participation, economic rights, income opportunities

### **Box 5. Every COVID-19 response plan and every recovery package needs to address gender impacts**

The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying its impacts.

The COVID-19 response measures should: (1) place women, girls, youth and women's organizations at the heart of the response; (2) transform the inequities of unpaid care work into a new, inclusive care economy that works for everyone; and (3) design socio-economic plans with an intentional focus on the lives and futures of women and girls.

Source: UN SG Policy brief (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on women. Available at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_apr\\_2020\\_updated.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf)

and many other areas of work. Addressing the gender and climate gaps in an integrated way will bring multiple sustainable development benefits.

**4. Make people the top priority in recovery:** In the fight against COVID-19, those who suffered from vulnerability, inequality and insecurity have been most affected. Efforts, knowledge and inputs from all – women, men, girls and boys are needed for an inclusive recovery process. A wave of compassion and proactivity brought by the COVID-19 response to protect vulnerable women, men, girls and boys in all contexts, including climate impacts, should continue. Governments should ensure that there are targeted COVID-19 response interventions to protect women in climate-sensitive sectors. The economic stimulus packages could include, among other measures, conditional cash transfers, free inputs of seeds or flexible credit lines backed by bank guarantees. In addition to immediate relief measures, it is crucial that governments keep on supporting women farmers to adopt climate-smart practices.

34. UN Women (2020). The First 100 days of COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens. Pg.39. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dlzTWa>



## 5. Trust experts and build technical capacities:

It is time we listen to climate scientists and policy advisors to win the climate change fight. A greater trust in evidence-based decisions and experts of all types takes us in the right direction. Building resilience requires creativity and agility. Sound scientific and technical capacity on linking climate solutions and benefits and value of gender-responsive and inclusive climate policies at both national and international levels should be supported. Better understanding and evidence base on gender differentiated issues and impacts will help develop targeted and transformative policies that address current societal challenges. Governments should seek ways to catalyze collaboration between business and science to inspire innovations.

## 6. Make a behavioural and cultural shift:

Many aspects of the COVID-19 response are similar to the types of changes we need as part of a comprehensive climate-change response. What is interesting is that many necessary shifts require a change in behavior and culture and new thinking, along with the use of existing technology. To advance gender equality in climate action we have to advocate for changes in attitude and practice and promote formal and informal communication- and education-based approaches to modify discriminatory social norms. Working with multiple stakeholders (including women, girls, men, boys, families, decision makers and community influencers) is often important in achieving norms change. It is clear that we have many of the tools to make major advances in addressing gender-transformation in climate change. What we need now is the political and personal will to apply them.

## Action by non-state actors

The economic side-effects of COVID-19 will have a devastating and lasting impact on many lives far beyond the direct health impact of the virus. In the post-COVID-19 recovery, consolidated and coordinated efforts are expected from different non-state stakeholders.

### 1. From financing institutions:

Many women daily wage workers and micro- and small entrepreneurs engaged in climate-sensitive sectors may not be able to repay their loans, as their incomes have diminished. Proactive economic stimulus and financing measures, such as extending moratorium on repayment of loans, financial industry bailouts, investments in cleaner energy or conditional assistance to carbon-intensive sectors to cut emissions, can ease the immediate burden. Besides this, reducing interest cost, helping with repayment of their loans and additional funding support in order to complete the harvest season, for example, may help micro- and small enterprises get back on their feet and drive economic recovery once the COVID-19 crisis recedes.

### 2. From civil society:

Civil society should work closely with grassroot communities to understand their unique challenges and provide support in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. It is becoming increasingly important that correct and clear information needs to be passed to communities in urban slums and in remote locations, especially those where women represent high shares of population. Organizations should also work with national and provincial governments in developing emergency and recovery response plans so that the ground realities can be well reflected and aligned. Civil society organizations should also share experiences and learnings from the ground with state actors and other partners.



Photo: @ UN Women/ Tasfiq Mahmood

**3. From private sector:** While the existing businesses should focus on strategies to revive the economic crisis post pandemic, their actions should not ignore the climate crisis. The business community should focus on developing innovative business plans, which are inclusive and climate resilient. Organizations globally are invited to partner with action platforms such as the World Economic Forum's COVID Action Platform, which ensures global cooperation among governments, international organizations and the business community in response to the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the UN Global Compact appeals to businesses to respond to COVID-19 crisis by following the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact.<sup>36</sup> These include supporting and respecting the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights and applying the precautionary approach to environmental challenges. This will be critical in the recovery period. Another resource offering guidance to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community are the seven Women's Empowerment Principles.<sup>37</sup>

**4. From multilateral and bilateral organizations:**

Multilateral and bilateral organizations have a key role in promoting, supporting, and creating an enabling environment for sustainable development. During crisis situations such as COVID-19 strong leadership and support of the multilaterals is essential in ensuring that governments and other stakeholders have knowledge and capacities to recover in a sustainable, inclusive and greener way. It is important to also ensure that multilateralism, cooperation and solidarity remain at the core of the governments' post-COVID-19 recovery policies. The multilaterals should improve working collectively in ensuring that climate change and gender equality commitments remain at governments' agenda, amplifying the voices of the marginalized so that no one is left behind.

The post-COVID-19 world may look very different to what we consider normal and many aspects of political, economic and social life remain uncertain but the fundamental societal changes that have emerged during the pandemic may offer us a chance to avoid a climate catastrophe in the long run and rebuild our world in an inclusive, just and green way.<sup>38</sup>

36. United Nations Global Compact. Uniting Business to respond to COVID-19 outbreak. A special appeal from the United Nations Global Compact. Updated on 19 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/news/4531-03-19-2020>

37. WE EMPOWER G7 (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: a call to action for the private sector. Available at: <https://www.weps.org/resource/covid-19-and-gender-equality-call-action-private-sector>

38. Crawford, V. How COVID-19 might help us win the fight against climate change, World Economic Forum - Geneva. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/covid-19-climate-change/>

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