

Women's health and climate change: a threat or an opportunity

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In 2023, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that climate-related illnesses, premature deaths, malnutrition in all its forms, and threats to mental health and well-being are increasing (1). Climate hazards are a growing driver of involuntary migration and displacement and a contributing factor to violent conflict. The impacts of the hazards are often interconnected, unevenly distributed across and within societies, and will continue to be experienced inequitably due to differences in exposure and vulnerability. Climate change poses a distinct risk to women's health. In many societies, differential exposure to such risks relates to gendered livelihood practices and mobility options (1).

In 2022, Egypt hosted the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27), and in 2023, the United Arab Emirates hosted the 28th Conference (2,3). Having the COP held in the region for 2 consecutive years is an opportunity that should not be missed. It is an opportunity to promote implementation of the recommendations of the 66th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environment and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes (4).

Climate change is arguably the most pressing global crisis that leaves no one behind (in a negative sense). Everyone sees and feels its impact, the rich and the poor, developing and developed countries, stable and unstable settings. It is therefore critical to push for integrated and synchronized efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change on the planet and its far-reaching impact on the most vulnerable population groups. The consequential weather extremes, including droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and floods cause population displacements, increased rates of gender-based violence, reduced availability of clean water, food insecurity, and significant disruptions to healthcare delivery and related supply chains.

Climate change is a public health issue globally (5-8). A growing body of research suggests that the climate crisis is not "gender neutral" (9-14). Women and girls experience the impacts of climate change most severely, and this further amplifies the existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to the livelihoods, health, and safety of women and girls. Research shows that women tend to be more affected by extreme temperatures; the

heat waves put women at a higher risk of poor maternal health, hypertension and heat exhaustion (9-13). A meta-analysis of 130 peer-reviewed studies commissioned by the Global Gender and Climate Alliance in 2016 concluded that women face higher health risks from the impacts of climate change than men (14).

There is a strong and complex relationship between women's health and climate change, which is further compounded by existing gender inequalities (15,16). Research and evidence from different parts of the world show that climate change and extreme weather events are detrimental to women's health (17-23). The 2022 IPCC notes that, "pregnancy and maternal status heighten vulnerability to heat, infectious diseases, food-borne infections, and air pollution. Extreme heat events, high ambient temperatures, high concentrations of airborne particulates, water-related illnesses and natural hazards are associated with higher rates of adverse pregnancy outcomes such as spontaneous abortion, stillbirth, low birthweight, and pre-term birth. Women and girls are at greater risk of food insecurity, which is particularly problematic in combination with the nutritional needs associated with pregnancy or breastfeeding" (24).

Some sessions of COP28 were dedicated to highlight the linkages between climate change and health, and to push for actions to mitigate the associated risks. The discussions and resolutions from these sessions should be used as stepping stones for intensified actions to empower women and foster gender equality in the context of climate change; promote climate resilient health systems that are inclusive and gender-responsive; and provide technical support and funding for research and analyses that will facilitate a better understanding of the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters on women and girls.

We must not see climate change as a technical problem that can be solved solely by reducing carbon emissions; climate change also uncovers human rights issues, health systems issues, as well as social justice and gender dynamics issues (4,25,26). Health policymakers, programme planners, the international development community, and civil society organizations concerned with the linkages between climate change and health must be cognizant of the need to embrace a women's health lens to a better understanding of the vulnerabilities and challenges and acknowledge the role that women can play in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

We need an all-hands-aboard approach if we are to reduce the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable, primarily the women who tend to bear the ultimate cost of a crisis they did not cause. We must embrace a collaborative partnership with the academic and research institutes in the Eastern Mediterranean

Region to create contextualized momentum and build a comprehensive evidence base that will help stakeholders introduce practical women-inclusive mitigation and response measures. Climate change related policies and mitigation programmes should not be gender-blind anymore.

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