

The New Humanitarian

What to do about climate change? Ask women – they have the most to lose

A fight for climate justice is a fight for gender justice

Winnie Byanyima

Executive director of Oxfam International



(A refugee in the Lake Chad Basin. UNICEF)

Climate change has always been a political issue. At its root are huge imbalances of power and inequality, which were on display at the recent UN climate talks in Poland. Those imbalances define who is most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, whose lives and livelihoods will be or already are upended. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the gender divide: the struggle for climate justice and gender justice must go hand in hand.

Climate change affects women in a profoundly different way than men. Culture and tradition in many places puts the role of caring for families on women. It is women, for example, who are responsible for collecting firewood, fetching water, and growing food to feed hungry mouths. So as the impacts of climate change take grip, it is women who must be on the front lines of adapting and finding solutions: new sources of water; new ways to feed their families; new crops to grow and new ways to grow them; new ways to cook.

In my country – Uganda – women already walk up to six hours a day to fetch water. As dry seasons become longer, women will be forced to walk further still. As I told the (mainly male) leaders of the G7 on behalf of the Gender Advisory Council earlier this year – anyone who doubts the science of climate change should try debating it with women walking further each year to collect water.

Rich nations were put to shame at the climate talks for their failure to recognise the urgency to limit the impacts of climate change. While climate-vulnerable countries called for an emergency response, a handful of wealthy and largely oil exporting countries – including Kuwait, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States – denied the science behind those calls for urgent action.

Climate change affects everyone, but poor people who already live in the ecological margins are hit hardest. They often rely on rain to grow crops, live in poorly built structures, and lack savings or insurance to fall back on when disaster hits.

It would take my aunt – a farmer in rural Uganda – 175 years to produce the same emissions as one of the 1%.

When disaster strikes, like the hunger crisis in the Sahel right now, it is girls who are being pulled out of school to help struggling families make ends meet. It is women who go without when there is not enough food to go around. Women have fewer assets to fall back on – and they are largely absent from decision-making, compounding their vulnerability.

How vulnerable you are to start with – what your status is in our unequal society – has a huge influence on how you will be impacted by climate change. For women, already vulnerable, climate change exacerbates their existing burdens of care.

Few disagree that women are hit hardest by climate change – but there is little agreement on what to do about it. It was a long struggle to elevate the importance of gender in the climate talks. Last year a Gender Action Plan was agreed after a decade of pressure from dedicated activists. Yet, the idea that the international community must pay attention to gender dynamics as it develops and implement climate change policies remains highly sensitive. Repeated efforts in the first week of negotiations in Poland to address the disproportionate impact of forced migration on women failed, blocked by a negotiator from the Arab Group of countries. It seems the mention of human rights, particularly women's rights, is too much for some countries to stomach: the topic was struck out of the agreement.

If we are to stop climate change from trampling on the rights of women and the most vulnerable, then we need to fight for more equal societies. This means questioning unequal gender roles, sharing work more evenly between men and women, and increasing women's participation in decision-making.

It also means we need to look at our economies, which do not value women's contributions. Our economies ignore the invisible, unpaid care work of billions of women around the world.

There is a striking parallel with how our economy overlooks the cost of runaway climate change – failing to make the polluters pay. These are both consequences of a broken economy. It's an economy that counts the wrong things, pursuing GDP growth at any cost.

The people in the boardrooms and governments who make the decisions that fuel climate disaster and inequality are mostly wealthy, white men. Billionaires are rewarded at the expense of poverty wages for the many, and at the expense of a habitable planet.

Remember, eight out of every 10 billionaires are men; the majority of the world's poor are women. It is boom time for billionaires and their disproportionate share of emissions! It would take my aunt – a farmer in rural Uganda – 175 years to produce the same emissions as one of the 1%.

At Oxfam, and in the wider humanitarian sector, we believe in a world free from the injustice of poverty, a struggle that cannot be isolated from the fight for climate justice and gender equality. To get there, we need far-reaching changes to our dominant economic model, and to the way we conduct politics. We need to recognise the burdens and inequities placed on women in the home, in crisis situations, and in our economic structure and begin to address gender when addressing the impacts of climate change. And with the scientific community telling us we have just 12 years to prevent global temperatures soaring out of control, we need change fast.

In the months ahead, governments must follow the lead of the world's most vulnerable nations and immediately begin strengthening their commitments to take action, including adding women's voices in the process.

Byanyima was one of the all-women champions for the Climate Vulnerable Forum's recent virtual climate summit. The CVF led efforts to inject greater urgency and ambition into the UN Climate Talks in Poland.