

# Climate change and gender justice

## Understanding the nexus between climate justice and gender justice

### Key messages

- Challenging institutional and societal structures caused and perpetuated by capitalism is necessary to achieve climate justice.
- Intersectional factors (gender, race, class, age) shape people's experiences of climate change and climate response as they affect access to and control over resources, power dynamics and experiences of discrimination.
- Both climate injustice and gender injustice are driven by the same social, economic and political inequalities that drive the unequal distribution of exposure and vulnerability to climate risks. Therefore, both injustices can be addressed simultaneously.
- Gender-just climate action can be achieved through adopting an intersectional approach, addressing racism, challenging the gender binary, applying a gender-transformative approach and decolonising climate action.

## 1. How and why is climate change a justice problem?

We are losing the race against climate change on many fronts. Even if global warming is limited to 1.5°C of warming, which is becoming increasingly challenging, hundreds of millions of people will face food insecurity, water stress, forced migration, disease, death, and loss and damage, including disability.<sup>1-3</sup> Climate change risks are eroding the last 50 years of development gains in health and poverty reduction. Climate change has worsened inequality by widening the gap in per capita income between the richest and poorest countries to 25 percentage points larger than it would be without climate change.<sup>3</sup>

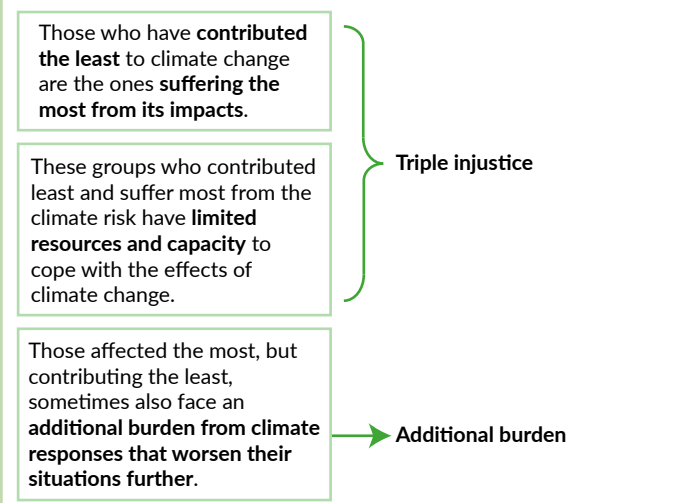
Climate change exacerbates existing poverty and inequality; it is estimated that developing countries will bear an estimated 75%–80% of the cost of climate change.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the unfairness in contribution to the climate crisis, disproportionate exposure to climate risk and limited capacity to cope (triple injustice), action to address climate change can add an additional burden to affected communities by inadvertently creating new sources of vulnerabilities, and reinforcing or redistributing existing vulnerabilities (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1 The gendered face of climate change

Gender justice moves away from conventional definitions that focus on men and women and embraces the heterogeneity embedded in gender identities. The Global Fund for Women defines gender justice as an intersectional approach that centres on the diverse needs, experiences and leadership of people most impacted by discrimination and oppression.<sup>6</sup> Climate justice is a human-centred approach aimed at safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its impacts equitably and fairly,<sup>7</sup> through the lenses of processes (procedural justice), distribution of costs and benefits (distributive), recognising differences and how they influence participation in decision making (recognitional) and intergenerational equity.

Gender justice follows from the general recognition that because of gendered power relations engineered by oppressive gender discriminatory norms, it is women who pay the disproportionate cost of the climate crisis.<sup>8,9</sup> It acknowledges that women's experiences of the climate crisis and responses to it differ because of power relations and that these experiences and accompanying needs for justice have largely been ignored in climate action debates. Gender justice recognises that women are

**Figure 1. Dimensions of climate injustice**



not homogenous, and experience multiple sources of oppression connected to struggles for justice, including climate justice. Gender justice should lead to equity (fair distribution of resources and opportunities) and equality (equal outcomes for all) in climate decision making and benefits. Therefore, the climate and gender justice nexus represents an intersectional approach that focuses on the needs, experiences, and leadership of people most impacted by discrimination.

## 2. How and why is climate change gendered?

### 2.1 Gendered experiences of climate change impacts

It is well established that vulnerability to climate change is gendered. People of different genders have differentiated experiences of climatic variability, extreme weather events and slow onset processes. While gender plays an important role, experiences are also mediated by other intersectional factors, such as ethnicity or (dis)ability, which intersect to shape who is vulnerable to climate change and who has a greater ability to adapt.

Gendered vulnerability exists because climate impacts exacerbate existing gender inequities. Gender inequities arise from power asymmetries and are visible in discriminatory gender norms, as noted above. They manifest in varied ways, including: (1) limitations in access to resources and opportunities, such as legal and social norms limiting women's ability to own land or access finance; for example, 102 countries still deny land rights to women under customary or religious practices, and in Cameroon, this negatively affects sustainable forest management;<sup>10</sup> (2) poor representation and decision making power, such that women are underrepresented in most parliaments and in international governance structures, including climate-related ones; and (3) carrying disproportionately the burden of care, for example, women are traditionally responsible for collecting firewood and water, and climate change often means that they have to travel further to do so, both exacerbating their time poverty and putting them at increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV).

### 2.2 Gendered experiences of climate action

Climate action at local, national and international levels is still not gender just. This spans the four main pillars of climate action: mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and climate finance. Climate policies and actions vary significantly in their approach to addressing gender inequity. Where climate policies do consider gender, "they inadequately address structural inequalities resulting from climate change impacts, or how gender and other social inequalities can compound risk".<sup>11</sup>

**Mitigation:** As a climate justice issue, responsibility for mitigation lies primarily in the global North. This spans a range of sectors, notably energy and food systems. In the global South, energy access and affordability remain key issues. Solutions, including off-grid renewable energy solutions and cleaner cooking options, can have significant gender impacts. Just transition, the idea that transitions from fossil fuels to a low carbon economy should be socially inclusive, has recently gained momentum. However, just transition strategies to date, such as promoting renewable energy technology, have not been successful at achieving gender justice or integrating gender considerations.

**Adaptation:** There is recognition that adaptation initiatives can exacerbate gender inequities unless explicit efforts are made not to and unless they target the root causes of vulnerability to climate impacts. For example, measures enacted by the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh increased the vulnerabilities of poor and landless women, especially those who rely on collecting aquatic resources for sale or consumption.<sup>12</sup> However, adaptation plans (including National Adaptation Plans<sup>13</sup>) still do not adequately include gendered determinants of climate vulnerability.

**Loss and damage:** Many examples of responses to extreme weather events exclude women, inadvertently increase their workloads, reinforce traditional gender roles, or expose women to increased risk of violence. For example, after two earthquakes in Nepal in 2015, Dalit women were left behind in relief and recovery. They did not have equal access to support such as food, water and shelter and faced harassment during disaster relief.<sup>14</sup> GBV increases in post-disaster shelters for cisgender women and non-binary and transgender people.

**Climate finance:** Gender-responsive climate financing instruments and funding allocations are needed. Only one third of climate finance programmes are designed to incorporate gender (in any form), and only "1.5% of climate-related ODA identified gender equality as primary objective".<sup>15</sup> When climate finance distribution overlooks gender, it risks funding gender-blind interventions that exacerbate inequities

## 3. Solutions and opportunities for gender-just climate action

Based on the systemic problems identified above, there is a range of approaches that are crucial to taking gender-just climate action, including adopting an intersectional

## ➔ Box 1. Are women 'the most vulnerable' to climate change? Challenging narratives

Women as a homogeneous group are often claimed to be 'the most vulnerable' to climate impacts, but there are several reasons to challenge this generalisation. Firstly, this implies that vulnerability is an inherent or intrinsic characteristic of women, but it is not helpful to 'vulnerabilise' all women because vulnerability is a question of power relations in context. Secondly, vulnerability is intersectional and context-specific, as not all women experience climate impacts in the same way, so it is vital to consider other intersectional factors that interact to determine people's lived experiences, including race, age, caste, class and disability. Third, women also demonstrate agency, resistance and leadership in the face of discrimination, and this can be hidden in generalisations about women's vulnerability. Finally, we need to focus on gender, not women and girls exclusively. This exclusive focus can be harmful as it overlooks other intersectional factors shaping women's experiences; it excludes non-binary and gender non-conforming people; and it can place the responsibility for poverty reduction and adaptation on women, increasing their burden. Instead of focusing on women alone, a gender perspective should look at the power relationships between different genders.

approach; challenging racism and racial inequalities; decolonising climate action; challenging the gender binary; using a gender transformative approach; and shifting from 'gender equality' to 'gender justice'.<sup>16</sup> Adopting an intersectional approach is key because it works to uncover the context-specific power dynamics which shape people's experience of climate change and climate action. In programming, it means understanding the intersecting factors in a given context (be it gender, disability, caste, etc.) and how they shape marginalisation/vulnerability to climate impacts in order to address these as a priority. Crucial to this is collecting disaggregated data to understand and monitor interventions.

### 1. Transform decision-making processes and spaces:

ensure the meaningful participation of those who are most impacted by climate change and climate action in planning, implementation and monitoring of climate actions. This involves shifting governance processes and creating new deliberative policymaking spaces that are designed to support inclusive decision making and provide opportunities to renegotiate pervasive gender (and other social) inequities in the context of climate change. This requires new procedures and tools for collaborative planning processes at all levels.

**2. Prioritise equity in climate finance:** there is a strong need for gender-responsive climate financing instruments and funding allocations, addressing both how funding decisions are made but also shifting the focus of funding to be more human rights-centred and inclusive.<sup>17</sup> There is increasing recognition of the importance of gender and equity in climate financing. Many climate funds started out as being gender-blind but recently have made efforts to integrate gender more systematically into their operations. However, there is still progress to be made. Increasing the gender responsiveness of climate finance is not only a moral imperative for respecting women's rights but also improves the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of investments.

**3. Engage with women's collectives:** a crucial element of recognising women's agency and leadership is listening to, engaging with and supporting women-led organisations, federated groups and collectives. The work of such collectives in maintaining societies and environments often goes unacknowledged. Actively supporting and financing these organisations acknowledges women's ability to

understand their own context, set their own priorities and make their own funding decisions. It is also an important part of supporting bottom-up approaches led by communities rather than imposing ideas or priorities in a top-down way.

**4. Address the burden of care:** a major element of achieving gender justice is addressing the gendered division of caring responsibilities and valuing care work differently. There is a need for stronger recognition of the value of paid and unpaid care work and informality, as well as investment in the care economy to improve working conditions and create well-paid, high-quality jobs. Importantly, there is a need to challenge norms around gendered caring responsibilities.

**5. Apply gender justice to all climate action:** just transitions to low-carbon societies must support renewable energy and gender-just transitions which actively consider gender, including improving women's access to green jobs and addressing the externalities of energy transitions in the global North on women in the global South. **Adaptation to climate change** must use approaches that explicitly aim to prevent maladaptation, promote transformational adaptation and challenge structural gender and social inequities, including addressing the root causes of vulnerability and expanding the understanding of local vulnerability to include global drivers.<sup>18</sup> The primary issue for **addressing loss and damage** as a climate justice issue is providing finance and assistance to the global South. Gender-just action to address loss and damage requires a similarly transformational approach, where the structural root causes of gender inequities are challenged and addressed, and the unequal impact of loss and damage on women is acknowledged and addressed.

## 4. What to address in your work?

Irish Aid's programme of work already has a strong focus on activities that address gender justice and climate justice. To strengthen climate and gender justice interventions further, it is necessary to emphasise acknowledging and mitigating the oppressive gender discriminatory norms and practices that inhibit women from meaningfully participating in climate action, and increasing women's representation in climate policy decision making, as well as climate response mechanisms.

## 4.1 Senior policy level

- Invest more in interventions that address gender-just climate action at local and national levels in Irish Aid partner countries as part of efforts to reduce women's vulnerability to climate change and increase women's participation in climate action.
- Recognise and promote women's active leadership and participation in climate decision making and governance at all levels, including in the justice sector.
- Reform laws, policies and justice institutions to make them more responsive to the climate needs of women and girls, in line with international human rights standards and national development plans.
- Champion gender at the UNFCCC and support the Gender Action Plan in all its elements, including strengthening civil society and grassroots organisations, especially for women. Support women's organisations in partner countries to lift the voice and representation of women at local, national and international levels.

## 4.2 Programme/technical staff level

- Prioritise awareness-raising and sensitisation campaigns to challenge and shift discriminatory gender norms. This can be achieved through identification of informal rules and practices fuelling gender stereotypes and discrimination, and designing advocacy campaigns to shift perceptions. This will involve acknowledging, identifying and addressing barriers that prevent the full participation of all people, particularly those most impacted by discrimination and oppression in climate action.

- Support the generation of evidence and learning about what works in gender-responsive climate action, as well as the generation of gender-disaggregated data to understand how women are excluded or included in different climate actions in Irish Aid partner countries. This should involve the compilation of gender-disaggregated data with an intersectional lens to adequately consider the full scope of gendered impacts in climate change policies and projects, as well as women's roles in climate action.

- Prioritise gender-just proofing of initiatives such as, for example, the Young Scientist Initiative, which aims to inspire young people to pursue science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in Kenya. Gender-just proofing such initiatives could ensure that more girls pursue STEM-related courses and shift the current gender imbalance in STEM fields.

## 4.3 Development partners

- Foster an approach to climate finance that promotes more equitable funding for women-led climate change adaptation and mitigation initiatives. This needs to be flexible and patient financing to increase accessibility for national and local women's organisations.
- Support climate action by women- and youth-led organisations and increase financial support for frontline women environmental human rights defenders.
- Mobilise global multi-stakeholder coalitions to accelerate feminist action for climate justice.

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