

## Women on the Frontlines of Climate Change: Why Their Voices Matter More Than Ever

Climate change is not gender-neutral. While it threatens communities worldwide, its impacts fall disproportionately on women—particularly in regions like West Africa, where environmental vulnerability collides with social inequities. Yet, despite their frontline experience and unique insights, women remain sidelined from the conversations and decisions that shape climate policy. To address the gendered dimensions of climate change effectively, we must elevate women’s voices, promote gender-sensitive solutions, and invest in research that captures the full scope of their experiences.

At the COP28 UN Climate Change Conference, women made up just 34 percent of the delegates, despite comprising nearly half of the global population. This imbalance reflects a broader pattern of exclusion that limits our ability to combat climate change in ways that address its diverse impacts. Research shows that when women participate in climate leadership, the resulting policies are more comprehensive and equitable. Yet, the persistent lack of gender-disaggregated data on climate impacts leaves critical gaps in our understanding, perpetuating women’s invisibility in climate discourse.

Nowhere is this issue more urgent than in West Africa, where climate change is already displacing millions and jeopardizing livelihoods. The region’s geography—characterized by limited water sources and low-lying coastal areas—makes it especially vulnerable to extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and windstorms. By 2050, climate migration within West Africa could affect up to 32 million people, with countries like Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal bearing the brunt of this upheaval. Women, however, face distinct barriers that make both migration and adaptation more difficult.

Social restrictions on women’s mobility are a significant obstacle. In countries like Cameroon, women cannot apply for passports without a male guardian’s consent. Poverty compounds the challenge: since women represent 70 percent of the global poor, they often lack the financial resources needed to relocate. Traditional gender roles further limit their flexibility, as women are disproportionately responsible for household tasks like childcare, food

preparation, and water collection. With nearly 40 percent of Africans living more than 30 minutes from a safe water source, women and girls spend hours each day securing water—time that could otherwise be spent pursuing education or paid work.

Violence and conflict, exacerbated by resource scarcity, create additional risks. The UN Security Council has identified climate change as a “threat multiplier” that intensifies social tensions and instability. In West Africa, this volatility has led to rising rates of gender-based violence, forced marriage, and exploitation. Women displaced by climate disasters often face heightened risks of sexual violence and abuse, both during migration and in refugee camps.

Economically, climate change deepens existing inequalities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where 60 percent of employed women work in agriculture, declining crop yields threaten their livelihoods. Women own less than 15 percent of the world’s land, limiting their ability to adapt by investing in climate-resilient farming techniques. The fishing industry, another key source of income, is also suffering as rising sea levels and overfishing reduce catches. Without economic security, women are less able to migrate or rebuild their lives after climate-related disruptions.

Health outcomes are similarly affected. Pregnant women face increased risks due to rising temperatures, poor sanitation, and malnutrition. Diseases like malaria, Zika, and dengue fever—exacerbated by warmer climates—pose serious threats to maternal and infant health. Limited access to healthcare and menstrual products further compromises women’s well-being, particularly in displacement settings.

Despite these challenges, women are not passive victims of climate change—they are powerful agents of change. Grassroots movements like West Africa’s “We Are the Solution” campaign are empowering women farmers to advocate for sustainable agriculture and gender equity. The Women’s Climate Assembly has brought together hundreds of women from across Africa to demand gender-sensitive climate policies. These initiatives demonstrate

that when women lead, they drive solutions that benefit entire communities.

To build climate resilience in West Africa, we must amplify women's leadership at every level. Governments should invest in gender-disaggregated research to better understand women's needs and experiences. Climate adaptation funding should prioritize women-owned businesses and community-led initiatives, particularly in agriculture and other sectors where women play a central role. Education and training programs can help women develop the skills needed to adapt to climate change and pursue sustainable livelihoods.

Policymakers must also address the structural barriers that limit women's mobility and economic independence. Legal reforms to eliminate discriminatory practices—such as requiring male consent for travel—are essential. Ensuring that women have equal access to land, credit, and resources will strengthen their ability to adapt and thrive in the face of climate change.

The stakes are too high to continue excluding half the population from the fight against climate change. Women's insights, resilience, and leadership are essential to building a future that is both sustainable and just. By supporting women as agents of change, we can create more effective climate solutions—benefiting not only women but entire communities and generations to come.