



Opinion

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# Women, Health, and the Climate Emergency

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## Abstract

The climate crisis represents an urgent and disproportionate threat to global health, with women facing heightened risks due to systemic gender inequalities, social determinants of health, and specific reproductive and caregiving responsibilities. This paper critically analyzes the nexus between gender, health, and climate change, demonstrating how climate-induced stressors—including extreme weather events, food and water insecurity, and the spread of vector-borne diseases—amplify existing health disparities, particularly among women in low- and middle-income countries. In addition to documenting vulnerabilities, the study highlights the critical yet often underrecognized role of women as leaders and agents of change in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. Through a synthesis of interdisciplinary research and international case studies, the paper advocates for gender-responsive climate and health policies that center equity, reproductive justice, and sustainability. Integrating a gender lens is essential not only for addressing current inequities but also for strengthening the long-term resilience and effectiveness of global public health systems.

**Keywords:** Women's health, Climate justice, Health equity, Environmental health, Sustainable development

## Introduction

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental concern, it is an urgent public health emergency. Yet, what remains under-acknowledged is that its health consequences are not experienced equally. Across the globe, women particularly those in low-income communities and developing nations face a disproportionate burden of the climate crisis. From rising maternal health risks to systemic barriers in accessing care during climate-related disasters, the intersection of gender and environmental vulnerability reveals a critical and overlooked truth: climate change is deepening existing gender inequalities and endangering women's health worldwide.

## Unequal Exposure to Environmental Hazards

In many societies, especially in rural and marginalized regions, women assume primary responsibility for essential daily tasks such as collecting water, farming, and managing household energy sources. As climate change intensifies extreme weather events including droughts, floods, and heatwaves these responsibilities not only become more difficult but also increasingly hazardous.

Exposure to contaminated water, indoor air pollution from cooking fuels, and the physical toll of long journeys under extreme conditions elevate health risks for women. Yet, these dangers often go unrecognized and unaddressed due to a lack of access to protective resources or basic medical care.

Moreover, women serve as caregivers within households and communities, placing them on the frontlines during climate-related disease outbreaks such as cholera, malaria, and respiratory illnesses. Despite their vital caregiving roles, women are often the last to receive emergency relief, healthcare services, or protective support due to entrenched social and cultural barriers.

## Reproductive and Maternal Health Under Threat

Among the most critical but under-discussed impacts of climate change is its threat to reproductive and maternal health. Pregnant women are especially vulnerable to environmental stressors such as extreme heat, air pollution, and food insecurity all of which are intensified by a changing climate.



Scientific research has linked high temperatures to increased risks of preterm birth, low birth weight, and stillbirth. In the aftermath of climate disasters, access to maternal healthcare is often disrupted: hospitals are destroyed, transportation is halted, and healthcare personnel may be overwhelmed or unavailable. As a result, women are frequently forced to give birth in unsafe, unsanitary, or unsupported conditions.

In addition, climate-induced displacement exposes women and girls to heightened risks of gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies, and limited access to contraception or prenatal care. These dangers compound existing health threats and leave lasting impacts on both physical and mental well-being [1-9].

### Systemic Inequality Magnifies the Impact

Climate change does not exist in a vacuum. Its effects are magnified by deep-rooted social and economic inequalities. Women are more likely to live in poverty, experience limited access to education and healthcare, and hold fewer economic opportunities all of which hinder their ability to adapt to or recover from climate shocks.

Furthermore, women's voices remain underrepresented in climate policymaking and emergency response planning. This systemic exclusion leads to gender-blind solutions that often fail to address the specific needs of women and girls. For instance, emergency shelters may lack adequate sanitation, privacy, or security, rendering them unsafe. Health interventions may omit reproductive care, while economic recovery programs frequently overlook the informal and care-based work largely performed by women.

### Climate Justice Demands Gender Equity

To address climate change effectively, we must recognize it for what it is: a gendered health crisis. Climate resilience cannot be achieved without putting women's health and rights at the center of climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, and healthcare delivery.

This means ensuring access to reproductive health services before, during, and after climate emergencies. It requires involving women in climate leadership, policy development, and community resilience planning. And it demands that health systems be equipped to respond to gender-specific vulnerabilities with dignity, inclusivity, and care.

### Conclusion: Survival Depends on Inclusive Solutions

Ignoring the gendered dimensions of the climate crisis is not

just an oversight, it is a failure that costs lives. Women's health must not be an afterthought in climate response strategies. It must be a priority.

The health effects of climate change are global, but their consequences are deeply personal. For millions of women, they are not only disruptive they are life-threatening. A just climate future is only possible if we acknowledge this reality and act on it. Because in the fight for climate justice, gender equity isn't optional, it is essential.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

There is no conflict of interest involving the authors.

### Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

Not applicable.

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