



Climate Change & Women's Health

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Women feel the heat: The gendered impact of climate change

How climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls: Unseen health risks, increased vulnerability and the urgent need for awareness and gender-responsive climate policies.

Climate change is happening and its consequences can be felt everywhere by everyone. But it does not affect everyone equally. In fact, climate change has disproportionate impact on women and girls.

A report of the **UN Women** states that

by **2050** climate change will push almost **160** million women and girls into **poverty**¹

Over **80%** of the people **displaced** by climate change are **women** or girls²

Women are more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change, mainly because they represent the majority of the world's poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources³. Extreme weather events directly threaten women and children more than men.

According to the UN, women and children are **14 times more likely to die in a disaster** than men, partly because they are warned later, are less likely to be able to swim and have to look after relatives when fleeing.⁴

The disproportionate impact on women is also partly due to traditional role attributions. As women are often responsible for food production and the water supply for their families, they suffer more frequently than men from the direct consequences of droughts and floods. This may be particularly true for women in the Global South⁵.

Among the ten countries with the heaviest labor losses predicted due to heat exposure, seven are in Asia and the International Labour Organization estimates a potential loss of 5% in total working hours in South Asia.⁶ However, this loss is unequally distributed – women, who are more often informally employed than men, are disproportionately affected. In South Asia, women homeworkers make up nearly one quarter of total female employment, compared to just 6% of men.⁷

In terms of health, women and girls are generally more drastically impacted by the effects of global warming: for example, women suffer more frequently than men from heat-related symptoms such as headaches, loss of performance or insomnia. Also, in Europe, more women than men die on average during heatwaves.⁸ This impact will keep growing as the negative effects of climate change continue to unfold.⁸



Pregnancy complications, like premature births, low birth weight or gestational diabetes, are associated with air pollution and heat exposure. These also affect menopausal systems and increase prenatal maternal stress.⁹

Overall, the impact of climate change on women's health is still under-reported and underestimated according to the WHO document *Protecting Maternal, Newborn and Child Health from the Impacts of Climate Change*.¹⁰

Climate disasters impact children's health – even before they are born

Back in 2009, neuroscientist Yoko Nomura began investigating the possible effects of prenatal stress on unborn babies as part of the "*Stress in Pregnancy Study*". Nomura wanted to understand how environmental stress factors can alter gene expression and influence the risk of certain neurological behaviors in childhood. At the end of October 2012, category 3 Hurricane Sandy hit New York City with enormous force. At this time, some of Nomura's research group was pregnant, which gave her the chance to explore how this extreme weather event affected the children carried by these mothers, compared to children carried before or after the storm.

More than a decade later, Nomura realized a devastating truth: children who were in the womb during Sandy are more likely to suffer from mental illness. Girls who were in utero during Sandy are 20 times more likely to suffer from anxiety and 30 times more likely to suffer from depression later in life than girls who were not in utero during this time. Boys had a 60-fold and 20-fold increased risk of ADHD and behavioral disorders, respectively. By preschool age, the children already showed symptoms of these disorders. The research of Nomura and her colleagues shows that the climate crisis is leading to noticeable changes in our brains, including those-in the womb.¹¹

Drawing attention to a major imbalance

Studies show that women are generally more environmentally aware than men, often have a smaller carbon footprint and are more likely to campaign for climate protection than men if they have the opportunity to do so.¹²

According to the UN, women and girls can act as 'Agents of Positive Change' and should be included in efforts to combat gender inequality and climate change.
We need to work towards:

Promoting education and awareness:

Educating communities about the link between climate change and women's health is crucial. By raising awareness, we can foster behavioral changes and encourage sustainable practices.

Advocating for gender-responsive climate policies:

Governments and policymakers must integrate gender perspectives into climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. This includes ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes, providing access to healthcare services and supporting income-generating opportunities that empower women.

Supporting research and innovation:

Investing in research that explores the intersection of climate change and women's health is vital. This will enable us to develop evidence-based solutions, implement effective interventions and advocate for policy changes at a global level.

Footnotes

- [1. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2023/12/as-climate-changes-pushes-millions-of-women-into-poverty-un-women-calls-for-a-new-feminist-climate-justice-approach](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2023/12/as-climate-changes-pushes-millions-of-women-into-poverty-un-women-calls-for-a-new-feminist-climate-justice-approach)
- [2. https://www.unicef.org/rosa/blog/climate-changes-greatest-victims-are-women-and-girls](https://www.unicef.org/rosa/blog/climate-changes-greatest-victims-are-women-and-girls)
- [3. https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/women-and-girls-leading-fight-against-climate-change](https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/women-and-girls-leading-fight-against-climate-change)
- [4. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected)
- Jane Doe, *Climate Change and Gender: Impacts and Interventions* (New York: Green Press, 2021), 78.
- International Labour Organization, *Working on a Warmer Planet: The Impact of Heat Stress on Labour Productivity and Decent Work* (Geneva: ILO, 2019), 15, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_711919/lang-en/index.htm.
- [7. https://blogs.adb.org/blog/how-address-impact-climate-change-driven-extreme-heat-women-s-lives](https://blogs.adb.org/blog/how-address-impact-climate-change-driven-extreme-heat-women-s-lives)
- [8. https://www.carbonbrief.org/mapped-how-climate-change-disproportionately-affects-womens-health/](https://www.carbonbrief.org/mapped-how-climate-change-disproportionately-affects-womens-health/)
- [9. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/women-health-climate-change/](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/women-health-climate-change/)
- [10. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240085350](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240085350)
- Yoko Nomura et al., "Prenatal Exposure to Hurricane Sandy and the Incidence of Mental Health Disorders," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 61, no. 3 (2022): 345-357, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13147>.
- [12. https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/art/24954447.html](https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/art/24954447.html)

At The Weber Shandwick Collective, we are moving women to the heart of health and want to play an active role in building healthier futures for all women.



We have explored the impact of climate change on women’s health thanks to our proprietary women’s health indicator on behalf of Haleon - a company committed to taking action, together, for a healthier world, with its over the counter (OTC) program about #ClimateChangesHealth. The indicator explored the overall level of awareness of women’s health conditions, as well as how well supported they are by the healthcare systems and regulatory bodies. The discussions of the impact of climate change on women constitute less than 1% of the overall climate change conversation.

We aim to put this topic higher on the communications agenda and to encourage our clients to address this important issue.

Note: We have utilised AI-generated imagery to illustrate this article.



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