



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 December 2021

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-sixth session

14–25 March 2022

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Zonta International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Zonta International, a leading global organization of more than 27,000 professionals in 63 countries pledged to empower women through service and advocacy, presents to the 66th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women the following statement for consideration of the Commission in its deliberations on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.

Climate change is a major global crisis, which has a negative impact on people and the environment around the world. The consequences of climate change are severe, especially for poor and vulnerable groups in developing countries. From natural disasters to food security, health, access to clean water and migration, in several parts of the world, the changing climate already has severe implications for women and girls. As families strive to cope with these changes, they may resort to negative coping mechanisms, forcing girls to leave school or marry early. Risk for gender-based violence also increases.

Zonta International believes that recognizing the climate crisis as a human rights issue is central to the fight against climate change and is also critical to efforts to create a sustainable, gender-equal future, one in which women's rights are recognized as human rights and every woman is able to achieve her full potential. In such a world, women have access to all resources and are represented in decision-making positions on an equal basis with men. In such a world, no woman lives in fear of violence. Climate change threatens human rights, such as right to life, food, water, health, education, livelihood and safety.

United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 13 "Climate Action" emphasizes the need for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. While Zonta International is not an environmental or disaster response organization, climate change disproportionately affects women and girls, and action is needed from a gender equality perspective. Zonta International, as an organization pledged to empower women and girls at the global and local levels and promote justice and universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, therefore, calls for action in favor of a fair and human rights-based approach to solve the crisis of climate change in the post-pandemic world and achieve greener, cleaner and equal societies. As stated by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on several occasions and affirmed in the most recent United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Report, "If the world does not act now, and forcefully, the catastrophic effects of climate change will be far greater than the current pandemic." Zonta International adds its voice to affirm that climate change requires swift and decisive actions and the time for such actions is now.

Climate change disrupts societies and individual lives. As competition for natural resources increases, conflicts may ensue. Climate change may also spur migration and generate climate refugees as a result of sudden climate events and/or changing climate processes; resulting agricultural disruptions and other economic factors force people to migrate to find paid work, putting women and girls especially at greater risk of exploitation, violence and trafficking in persons.

Climate change also undermines food security. In developing countries, it is largely the responsibility of women and girls to search for water and firewood for households, which takes time. As droughts increase, these tasks require even more time. Extended search distances may also put girls and women at risk of gender-based violence.

In addition to the depletion of income, climate change presents different health threats for men and women. According to the World Health Organization, during natural disasters, women and girls are more likely to be severely affected or killed as a result of their roles and responsibilities in society. In climate-affected environments, reproductive health can be at risk, such as nutritional deficiency during breastfeeding and lack of access to health care during pregnancy. Again, implications for women's and girls' health and safety are unique and serious.

Climate change includes social and intergenerational injustice; those who have contributed least to the climate change crisis are the most impacted. Climate change also affects women and men differently due to the gendered division of labor, cultural norms and different societal roles. Girls face discrimination and abuse based on their gender. Poverty, ethnic background and disabilities may multiply these challenges. Understanding the current status of women and girls, unequal structures and unfair cultural norms, and making changes are important to tackle inequalities in structures that place the greatest burden of the consequences of climate change on girls and women.

Women's active participation is crucial to addressing the climate crisis. Studies have found that greater female representation in national parliaments leads countries to be more likely to ratify international environmental treaties and adopt more stringent climate change policies, which are greatly needed if efforts to curb the effects of climate change are to be successful. Moreover, among the countries that signed on to the Paris Agreement, those countries led by women have made some of the most committed national climate action plans.

Women have diverse experiences of how best to adapt to climate change and how to most effectively control it. If properly involved, women and girls can set and promote climate-friendly lifestyles; they can become change agents and effective leaders in mitigating the risks of climate change. However, women often have limited opportunities to influence decision-making. It is, therefore, important to include more women and girls in decision-making roles in the area of climate change going forward.

Girls' education is also key to combating climate change. Education is a human right and key to developing societies. However, today, globally more than 130 million girls between the ages of 6 and 17 do not have access to education. There are many reasons for this lack of access, including cultural norms, child marriages and early pregnancies, but also increased workloads as a result of more natural disasters and extreme weather conditions caused by climate change. Girls' education, however, also has a key role to play in combating climate change. Investments in girls' education yields high returns, such as breaking cycles of poverty, fostering economic growth and empowering women both in the home and workplace. Education also improves the capacity of girls and women and their communities to adapt to climate change and offer solutions and innovations to climate change.

Equal economic opportunities also need to be part of the solutions to the climate crisis. The economic impacts of climate change more severely affect populations in developing countries, especially those who depend on agriculture, whose actions and lifestyle, at the same time, contribute less to climate change. In these environments, women's and girls' unpaid agricultural and domestic work is essential to the livelihoods of their families and communities. Climate change threatens the material resources on which these livelihoods rely, and increases domestic and subsistence workloads, therefore primarily impacting women and girls. At the same time, persistent gender discrimination in accessing education, training, material and financial resources, technology, and land property hinders women's and girls' opportunities to diversify their livelihoods. Besides gender disparities in accessing

and controlling resources, women in these environments also have reduced access to income-generating opportunities, either locally or through migration, face high gender pay gaps and often cannot even control the proceeds of their own labor, when cultural norms put them under the control of the male “heads” of their households. Conversely, women’s economic empowerment boosts productivity, diversifies income and increases income equality.

Zonta International calls on Member States and the United Nations to address the immediate and long-term effects of climate change on women and girls by:

- Actively taking into account human rights, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in defining and implementing national climate action plans, including gender-responsive measures that are more effective and respectful of human rights.
- Upholding the principles of climate justice agreed to in the Paris Agreement and ensuring that the most marginalized groups do not bear the brunt of the climate crisis.
- Establishing more gender-balanced governing bodies to integrate gender sensitive climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning, as per Sustainable Development Goal 13.2 and the Paris Agreement.
- Ensuring girls’ access to education at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels.
- Including basic education on climate change and its consequences to nature and societies for all students, recognizing and addressing the social and economic factors aggravated by climate change as per Sustainable Development Goal 13.3.1.
- Ensuring that climate adaptation and mitigation plans address the unique needs of women and the barriers to women’s full participation in the economy, including childcare and elder care services, occupational segregation, informal work, the gender pay gap, and legal and social restrictions.
- Including women in the formation of disaster preparedness and response plans. These plans should recognize the unique needs of women and girls, prioritize their health and safety, and include responses to gender-based violence.
- Acknowledging and including women’s voices about the harmful impacts of climate change and listening to and learning from their attempts to mitigate and adapt to those impacts.
- Developing policies and frameworks to address climate change that recognize its gendered impacts and integrating gender equality into all approaches to mitigate the effects of climate change.
- Recognizing the importance of women as decision-makers, educators, caregivers, community leaders and experts across sectors and utilizing their unique perspectives and expertise to develop successful, long-term strategies to address climate change.

To achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, the global community must recognize women and girls as a group that is both more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and key to developing long-term solutions to address those impacts. We must all come together to call for fair and human rights-based actions now to solve the crisis of climate change in the post-pandemic world and achieve greener, cleaner and equal societies.

Endorsed by:

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