

# Policy Briefing

## Women, Power & Policymaking

August 2019



# Gender Equality in Combatting Climate Change: The African Context

AGNES A BABUGURA

## Executive summary

Gender equality is recognised as a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In all spheres of life, it is a powerful driver for growth and social justice, and a requirement for achieving sustainable development. Within the climate change arena, it is fundamental to combatting climate change effectively. The significance of gender equality is expressed in numerous national, regional and international legal instruments, aimed at eliminating discrimination based on gender. This policy briefing emphasises the importance of gender equality in the fight against climate change, with special reference to Africa. Among the key recommendations is the need for genuine progress towards integrating gender equality into solutions to combat climate change. Ultimately, this will require profound and systemic change involving gender mainstreaming and transformation of gender relations and societal structures.

# Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It calls for equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys. This does not mean that women and men are the same. It simply means that their rights, responsibilities and access to opportunities should be neither dependent on, nor constrained by, their sex. This call for gender equality is about the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men being equally valued and considered, recognising diversity within society.

In all spheres of life, gender equality is a powerful driver for growth and social justice.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the primary requirements for achieving sustainable development. Within the climate change arena, it is fundamental to combatting climate change effectively. The importance of gender equality is expressed in numerous national, regional and international legal instruments aimed at eliminating discrimination based on gender.<sup>2</sup> The first legal instrument calling for gender equality was the UN Charter, which came into force in 1945.<sup>3</sup> The principle of gender equality is therefore not new. It has existed for decades and yet nowhere in the world have women and men achieved equality. Particularly in developing countries, significant gender inequalities remain a major challenge. In many African countries, women and girls continue to face profound gender inequalities, which do great harm to individuals and nations.<sup>4</sup>

## Why does gender equality matter in combatting climate change?

*To deny people their human rights, is to challenge their very humanity.*  
Nelson Mandela<sup>5</sup>

Besides being a fundamental human right, gender equality is a means for shaping effective interventions that are practical and based on principles of social justice, dignity and respect for the worth of men, women, boys and girls, all of whom are important actors in formulating effective climate change interventions. They bring particular perspectives, priorities and strengths resulting from their life experiences. Drawing on their differentiated

---

1 UN Women, *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*, 2014, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/10/world-survey-2014>, accessed 5 May 2019.

2 UNDP (UN Development Programme), *Africa Human Development Report 2016*, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/afhdr\\_2016\\_lowres\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/afhdr_2016_lowres_en.pdf), accessed 19 July 2019.

3 UN, *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*, 1945, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2019.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5 Nelson Mandela, 'Address by Nelson Mandela to the Joint Session of the House of Congress, Washington DC – United States, 1990', [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/1990/900626\\_usa.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1990/900626_usa.htm), accessed 19 July 2019.

knowledge and experiences is therefore vital. The tendency to ignore women and girls' perspectives means losing out on ideas, visions and potential effective climate change interventions that are gender sensitive and responsive. In turn, this weakens democracy, undermines women and girls' rights and limits their options to become agents of change.

It is widely acknowledged that climate change is the defining challenge of this generation, holding the greatest environmental, social and economic threats. These will be experienced differently across regions, nations, communities, social groups, individuals and gender.<sup>6</sup> Owing to fundamental gender differences and inequalities that are deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms, religious and political rights, and institutionalised rules, climate change presents gender-differentiated impacts, vulnerabilities and responses.<sup>7</sup> Gender inequalities, for example, limit equal access to social and economic capital, productive resources, livelihood diversification strategies, information, health services, education, skills and technology – all of which are vital in shaping and determining men and women's ability to respond to climate change. In Africa, this has already been demonstrated by past and current experiences of extreme climatic events such as droughts, floods and cyclones.<sup>8</sup> For example, between 2013 and 2019 Africa suffered severe droughts across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa. Serious floods have been experienced in Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Ghana. Cyclones have laid waste to parts of Madagascar, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. On closer scrutiny of these extreme climatic events, it is clear that women and girls often bear the brunt of the impact.

On 14 March 2019, Cyclone Idai devastated parts of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe, leaving hundreds dead, thousands of homes destroyed and almost 2 million people affected. Among those affected, women and adolescent girls paid the biggest price.<sup>9</sup> Close to 75 000 pregnant women were left vulnerable owing to a lack of reproductive health services, sanitation and clean water. About 7 000 pregnant women were said to be at risk of experiencing life-threatening complications. There were reports of women having to give birth at evacuation centres without skilled attendants and with poor sanitation. Both these women and their babies were endangered. Within the camps set up by aid agencies and at host families, women and adolescent girls, traditionally tasked with care and domestic work, took on additional responsibilities during the crisis. They got on with the business of figuring out where to get clean water for everyone as well as find firewood for cooking. It was the women and girls who had to queue for long hours to receive food aid in order to ensure their families had food. Women and girls were also faced with the risk of abuse in the camps.<sup>10</sup>

---

6 IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report*, 2015, [https://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/ipcc/ipcc/resources/pdf/IPCC\\_SynthesisReport.pdf](https://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/ipcc/ipcc/resources/pdf/IPCC_SynthesisReport.pdf), accessed 13 May 2019.

7 IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), *The Gender Advantage: Women on the Front Line of Climate Change*, 2014, <http://www.ifad.org/climate/resources/advantage/gender.pdf>, accessed 6 May 2019.

8 Global Gender and Climate Alliance, *Gender and Climate Change: A Closer Look at Existing Evidence*, November 2016, <https://weddo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GCCA-RP-FINAL.pdf>, accessed 13 May 2019.

9 UN News, "Race against time" to help women who bore brunt of Cyclone Idai: UN Reproductive Health Agency', 27 March 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035581>, accessed 8 May 2019.

10 Care International, 'Cyclone Idai: Women and girls face risk of abuse in camps', 28 March 2019, <https://www.careinternational.org.uk/stories/cyclone-idai-women-and-girls-face-risk-abuse-camps>, accessed 13 May 2019.

Such devastating climatic events underline Africa's urgent need to reinforce the principle of gender equality in all efforts aimed at combatting climate change. They are a reminder that without gender equality there is no climate justice.

## Progress and gaps in integrating gender equality into combatting climate change

In recent years, activists, civil society organisations and various other groups have become more vocal, demanding that gender equality and women's empowerment be mainstreamed in all procedures and policies of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to which African states are signatories. This pressure has yielded some positive results. Since 2010 gender equality issues have been included in several thematic areas of the UNFCCC, with some key outcomes. These include the 2012 decision on gender balance and women's participation, the 2014 launch of the Lima Work Programme on Gender and the adoption of the first Gender Action Plan (GAP) launched in Berlin in 2017 at COP23.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Africa, the African Working Group on Gender and Climate Change was established in 2013. It is tasked with coordinating and providing leadership for Africa's engagement in regional and global gender and climate change processes. In advancing the efforts of the working group, African leaders, through the Committee of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change (CAHOSCC), agreed to develop the CAHOSCC Women and Gender Programme on Climate Change in 2014. This is aimed at engaging women in climate change-related actions. Among the planned activities is the provision of practical support in training women negotiators to ensure gender-responsive legislation and programme implementation in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

In some African countries, there have been efforts to harmonise climate change policies and actions with national gender policies. For example, Kenya became one of the first African countries to develop legislation and policies that promote the participation of women and men in climate change activities.<sup>13</sup> Since 2010 African countries such as Mozambique, Egypt, Tanzania, Liberia and Zambia have developed national climate change and gender action plans known as 'ccGAPs'. These plans are intended to reduce

---

11 Blomstrom E & B Burns, 'Gender Equality in the Climate Agreement', WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization) Gender Brief, 9, <https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/5904-GenderClimateBrief.pdf>, accessed 13 May 2019; Women & Gender Constituency, 'Adoption of the first Gender Action Plan under the UNFCCC', 15 November 2017, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Press%20release%20GAP%20adoption.pdf>, accessed 13 May 2019.

12 AWGGCC (African Working Group on Gender and Climate Change), 'Gender Analysis of the Paris Agreement and Implications for Africa', Briefing Note, 2017, <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/56478/IDL-56478.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, accessed 14 May 2019.

13 CDKN (Climate & Development Knowledge Network), 'Opinion: How Kenya can turn its gender and climate change commitments into reality', 14 April 2014, <https://cdkn.org/2014/04/opinion-how-gender-issues-affect-climate-action-in-kenya/>, accessed 9 June 2019.

the ‘implementation gap’ that persists between gender-equitable climate policies and gender-equitable climate actions on the ground.<sup>14</sup>

While some strides have been made in integrating gender equality into the fight against climate change, significant gaps remain. The AU’s gender strategy acknowledges that African states are yet to fully empower and meaningfully engage women in climate justice initiatives. It is noted that, owing to patriarchal social norms (values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, institutionalised rules and practices), men continue to enjoy the benefits of male privilege. This perpetuates unequal power relations between women and men, undermining women and denying them the opportunity to contribute equally to climate change solutions. Discussions on how best to overcome culturally embedded gender inequalities are often fiercely contested and criticised in African patriarchal societies, resulting in resistance to change.

The debate on gender equality is already a complex and sensitive issue in traditional African societies. The debate on climate change is also inherently complex. Introducing gender equality into the debate on climate change is easily mistaken for cultural interference, leading to misunderstandings about what constitutes gender equality. Calling for gender equality in combatting climate change, for example, is often mistaken for supporting only women. There is therefore a need to correct this narrative.

Beyond the challenges fuelled by patriarchal social norms, African states fall far short of implementing their stated commitments to integrate gender equality into solutions to combat climate change. Recently there has been some renewed commitment to integrate gender equality into national and regional climate change policy and initiatives. These include the [AU Strategy on Climate Change \(2014\)](#), The African Development Bank’s [Second Climate Change Action Plan \(2016-2020\)](#), the East African Community’s [Climate Change Policy Framework \(2013\)](#), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s [Regional Climate Change Strategy](#), ccGAPs, national adaptation plans and nationally determined contributions. Africa needs to take this renewed commitment seriously if genuine progress towards gender equality in the fight against climate change is to be made.

## What can be done to better integrate gender equality into combatting climate change?

Better integration of gender equality in combatting climate change requires taking into account various gender aspects; for example, issues of power and participation in policy- and decision-making processes. This encompasses the proportion of women and men in decision-making positions, research, negotiations and equal representation in shaping

---

<sup>14</sup> IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), *The Art of Implementation: Gender Strategies Transforming National and Regional Climate Change Decision Making*. Gland: IUCN, 2012.

climate change debates and solutions. There is also a need to consider gender-related aspects of climate change such as the impact on women, men, boys and girls, their different contributions and perceptions of climate change, and the solutions they prefer for mitigation and adaptation. To assess these aspects, a gender analysis must be undertaken in a gender mainstreaming process. Gender mainstreaming, according to the UN, is<sup>15</sup>

a process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

The process requires an ambitious approach that accepts male and female identities and is willing to become truly inclusive, responding to their specific needs. It requires that gender equality issues become the centre of analyses and policy decisions, programmes, financing, institutional structures and processes, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

It is important to note that gender mainstreaming is not about simply adding a 'woman's component' or a 'gender equality component' to existing interventions for combatting climate change. The process entails that the perceptions, experiences, knowledge, interests, needs and priorities of males and females are given equal weight in planning and decision-making. It is also important to note that gender mainstreaming is contextual. Different contexts need to be informed by an effective gender analysis.<sup>16</sup> This process plays a critical role in ensuring that women, men, girls and boys are not disadvantaged by climate change interventions. It allows for the collection of vital gender-disaggregated data that is needed to inform the various gender mainstreaming phases.

## Policy recommendations

- There is a need for genuine progress towards integrating gender equality into combatting climate change in Africa. This requires profound and systemic change involving gender mainstreaming and transformation of gender relations and societal structures. It is necessary to put in place strategies and action plans that address structural barriers to gender equality in climate change policies and actions. Such barriers include patriarchal social norms and discriminatory laws and customs that disempower women and exclude them from meaningfully participating in and contributing equally to climate change solutions. Authorities of national and local institutions, in collaboration with institutions

---

15 UNDESA (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, *Gender Mainstreaming: An Overview*. New York: UNDESA, 2002.

16 UNDP, *Gender, Climate Change and Community-Based Adaptation*. New York: UNDP, 2010.

of social responsibility (eg, non-governmental and civil society organisations, schools), will need to take the lead in acting on this recommendation.

- Governments, in partnership with civil society organisations, should create greater awareness and understanding of the relevance of gender equality in the fight against climate change, as well as the complex links between the two concepts. This will help to ease discussions on how best to overcome culturally embedded gender inequalities, especially in patriarchal societies. The aim is to create well-informed communities empowered to push for change. This awareness will also help to encourage policy- and decision makers to prioritise and translate national commitments to gender equality into more tangible climate actions on the ground.
- Governments and institutions of social responsibility must invest in women and girls and empower them to meaningfully participate in all climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Instead of being seen as victims of climate change impacts, they should be seen as part of the solution, with specialised knowledge and capacities to influence and shape effective gender-responsive climate change actions.

# Author

**Dr Agnes A Babugura**

holds a PhD in Environmental Science from the University of the Witwatersrand. She is a Senior Academic, Social Researcher and Programme Leader for Geography and Environmental Science in the Faculty of Social and Health Science at IIE MSA (formerly Monash South Africa).

## About the Africa Portal

The Africa Portal is the product of a longstanding partnership between the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI). Launched in 2010, it provides a digital platform for thought leaders across the continent and beyond to share their informed perspectives on matters related to African development, economics and politics.

The Africa Portal also curates a comprehensive collection of research material on African policy issues. Our library holds over 8 000 research reports, occasional papers and policy briefs. The entire repository is open access, equipped with a sophisticated search function and available for free, full-text download. The material in the library has been provided by content partners of the Africa Portal who benefit from wider dissemination of their research to a global community.

## About the South African Institute of International Affairs

The South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) has a long record as South Africa's premier research institute on international issues. It is an independent, non-government think tank whose purpose is to encourage wider and more informed awareness of the importance of international affairs. It is both a centre for research excellence and a home for stimulating public debate. The major research projects within the Institute produce a range of deliverables to policymakers and the wider public in the form of publications, policy briefs, workshops and conferences.



# About the Centre for International Governance Innovation

We are the Centre for International Governance Innovation: an independent, non-partisan think tank with an objective and uniquely global perspective. Our research, opinions and public voice make a difference in today's world by bringing clarity and innovative thinking to global policy making. By working across disciplines and in partnership with the best peers and experts, we are the benchmark for influential research and trusted analysis.

## Cover image

Somali women taking drinking water from a well/hole in the sand and pouring it into plastic containers, North-Western province, Lasadacwo Village, Somaliland on 14 November 2011 (Eric Lafforgue/Art In All Of Us/Corbis via Getty Images)

All rights reserved. Copyright is vested in the South African Institute of International Affairs and the authors, and no part may be reproduced in whole or in part without the express permission, in writing, of the publisher.