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## Climate Change, Health and Gender: An Overview of Implications on Women

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### Abstract

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The catastrophic environmental events that characterized the last few decades which include hurricanes, Tsunamis, melting of the glaciers, the rising of the ocean and flooding have shocked the world. These global catastrophes have been caused by numerous factors ranging from deforestation, desertification to the emission of Greenhouse gases. Specifically, the vulnerabilities and health risk posed by climate change to the health of women have been a major concern. It is against this background that this paper presents a descriptive analysis utilizing secondary data to examine the linkage between climate change and health of women. The study finds that vulnerabilities of women to the numerous lives threatening effect of climate have been exacerbated by the insensitive nature of most climate change response programmes and policies. This study concludes that to solve the health implications of climate change on women, goes beyond drafting a special protocol or framework protecting women or drawing new programme for men. Rather a collective efforts of all to act responsively to improve the environment is required. Therefore, the study recommends among others the need to create knowledge based job for women.

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**Keywords:** Climate Change, Health, Gender

### Introduction

The catastrophic events that characterized the last few decades (such as the hurricane Katrina in the United States which claimed thousands of lives and properties and alongside thousands of unfulfilled dreams, vision, goals, and aspirations, the Tsunamis in Asia, and most recently the Hurricane Sandy. the increasingly melting of the glaciers, the rising of ocean and flooding of many cities which has led to hardship and difficulty for many displaced person.

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Also, the massive pollution of rivers, sea, ocean and the Atlantic leading to the loss of biodiversity and specifically the extinction of many species, the breakout of wildfire, earth quakes and tornadoes wild wind, drought, heat waves, consequence of indiscriminate disposal of waste by big industries leading to contamination of underground water, increasing prevalence of sickness of global endemic proportion whose cause has been traced to effect of global warming) has shocked the world. These global catastrophes are believed to be caused by numerous factors ranging from deforestation, desertification, and the emission of Greenhouse gases. Specifically, vulnerabilities and health risk posed by climate change on the health of women such as respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, social and mental stress, heart attacks, strokes and other cardiovascular disease, cancer resulting in high maternal mortality rate have received attention on global scene (WHO/UNEP/WMO, 2003)

This paper presents a descriptive analysis based on secondary data to examine the linkage between climate change and health of women. It examines the major causes of climate change as well as the debate as to the evidence of climate change, the linkage between maternal health and climate change, the response to the consequences of climate change on gender and the challenges to alleviating the negative impact of climate change on gender. The study concludes that there is need to incorporate gender into climate change response programmes and policies.

### **Conceptual Discourse: Gender, Climate Change and Health**

For decades in climate change research the three terms climate change, health and gender have not been linked together (Preet et al, 2010). The term 'gender' refers to the socially constructed norms and values, roles, and relations considered appropriate for men, women, boys and girls. It regulates what is endorsed, valued in, and expected from a man and a woman in a given circumstance, and these distinct roles and relations give rise to gender differences (WHO, 2009).

Climate change has been severally defined. Climate change refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity. This usage differs from that in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which defines "climate change" as: "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001).

Global climate change raises therefore the issue of the relationship between the general use of resources by human populations and the limits set to resource utilization (Luterbacher1996:7).Similarly, Climate change and its potentially devastating short-term and long-term consequences have received heightened attention at global, national, and regional levels during this decade. Climate change is described as the 'biggest global health threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (Preet et al,2010). More so, Climate Change does affect in a direct and indirect way human health. The indirect effects are not easily seen and understood (Spohr, 2004).Science shows that climate change will affect human health across the world. From diminished air quality and degradation of food and water supplies to increasing levels of allergens and catastrophic weather events, (Natural Resources Defence Council, 2011).

Fundamentally, Climate Change affects directly human health, women differently than men. In some cases more women are affected than men, in some other cases women are more severely affected (Women's Environment and Development Organization, 2007). The consequences among several other that humans are exposed to as a result of climate change include temperature-related morbidity and mortality, health effects of extreme weather events, air pollution-related health effects, health effects of water- and food-borne contamination, vector-borne and zoonotic diseases, and health effects of exposure to ultraviolet ray (WHO,2003).

Climate change is not a neutral process; first of all, women are in general more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, not least because they represent the majority of the world's poor andbecause they are dependent on natural resources that are threatened (Women's Environment and Development Organization 2007). The technological changes and instruments that are being proposed to mitigate carbon emissions,which are implicitly presented as gender-neutral, are in fact quite gender biased and may negatively affect women or bypass them(Spohr,2004).

Limited research on the impact of increased heat exposure on women in low and middle income countries reveals that it slows down women's daily activities and forces them to spend more time collecting water, food, or firewood.(Preet et tal, 2010). In general women's mortality related toheat waves is higher than the mortality of men (Röhr et.al, 2004). Climate change currentlycontributes to the global burden of disease and is projected to increase threats to human health(Preetet al, 2010). There is increasing evidence that global climate change and climate variability will affect the quality and availability of water supplies (Natural Resources Defence Council, 2011).

Current scientific research shows that climate change will have major effects on precipitation, evapotranspiration, and runoff — and ultimately on the water supply (WEFC, 2012)

## **Responses To Climate Change**

To solve the challenges posed by climate change several local, regional and international conferences have been held culminating in several protocols, international legal framework such as Rio Framework Convention, Kyoto Protocol, Copenhagen Conference, and Durban Conference. Nationally, several countries have promulgated laws and decrees to ensure environmental safety. Similarly several nations have established special agencies to look into the environmental issues and radical environmental reforms have taken place, which have also extends to awareness and campaign at local level. More so, there has been establishment of green club in secondary and primary schools as well as higher institutions of learning. In urban and suburban area civil based organization and even individuals have made green a major issue while companies has similarly made greening a major pillar of their corporate policy, to the extent that even magazines have published green edition of their magazine.

During the last 20 years, several international bodies and conferences have signed documents stating that the gender perspective should be integrated into policy and other documents (Preet et al, 2010) United Nations Conferences like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002 acknowledged the role of women in sustainable development (UNWOMEN, 2009).

In July 2, 2010, a new entity called 'UN Women' was created after merging four UN organizations working on women and gender issues, to enhance the progress in meeting the needs of women and girls over the world (UN WOMEN, 2010).

In 2007, the Member States of the World Health Organization adopted a resolution WHA 60.25 on the integration of gender analysis and action into the work of WHO at all levels (WHO, 2009).

## **Challenges**

However, in spite of the numerous attempts at curbing the negative impact of climate on the health of women significant challenges still exist. Fundamental amongst which is the lack of gender sensitiveness in most world health organization document addressing the health implication of climate on gender and women in specific. In a research by Preet, et al (2010) a descriptive research based on literature review and the review of some selected policy documents especially those of world health organization and selected United Nations Document aim to examine the extent to which gender perspective has been integrated into policy documents and also the number of publications where gender has been in focus. Three main criterions were used in the research this include gender-sensitivity (awareness) gender-responsiveness, and genderTrans-formativeness. A document is considered gender-sensitive, if it is generally conscious of gender issues and takes the specific needs of both sexes into account. It is gender-responsive, if it is based on sex-specific data and stresses the involvement of men and women. Gender-trans formativeness, finally, refers to gender-specific evaluation of programs.

The study finds gender to be underrepresented and non-existing variable in research and studied policy documents in the field of climate change. By implication these suggests that there is a bidirectional relation between policy and research. It can be argued that including a gender viewpoint was never a criterion for the documents reviewed in this study; hence, the lack of it is an important disclosure to consider (Preet, et al, 2010).

Another albatross to solving the risk posed to women through climate change is the distorted understanding of green movement; the green movement has been totally misunderstood, misused, and abused.

Green has become the license to feel good without doing good, to raise awareness without actually changing our behaviour. Green is not all about earth day concerts, it is not about 205 ways to do green, it is not the latest dot.com gold rush rather it is a survival strategy. (Friedman, 2008)

Fundamentally, growing level of illiteracy around the globe is inhibiting women's capacity to make informed decision. According CIA World Fact report over two-thirds of the world's 793 million illiterate adults are found in only eight countries (Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan); of all the illiterate adults in the world, two-thirds are women (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012)

Finally, a major debacle to stopping the negative impact of climate change on health of women is poverty. The increasing effect of poverty among women specifically in developing country can never be overemphasis. Majority of women in Global south depend on economic activity that exposes them to debilitating impact of global warming. Other challenges include excessive dependency on oil, greed and lack of awareness.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Having examine the correlation between Climate change, Health and Gender specifically the its implication on the Maternal Health. It is significant to note that to solve health implication of climate change on women is beyond rafting a special protocol or framework protecting women or drawing new programmes for men instead a collective efforts of all to act responsively to improve their environment is required. No better point best illustrate this than a remarkable story told by Thomas Friedman in one of his well celebrated book "*Hot, Flat, and Crowded*" A CEO had to babysit for his young daughter who was away on an official assignment. While at home he tried to read the papers, the little baby will not allow him. Totally frustrated by the constant interruption of the granddaughter he came across a full page of NASSA picture of the earth from space, he got a brilliant idea and ripped it up into small piece and told the child to put it back together. He then settled in for what he expected to be a good half hour of peace and quietness but just after few minutes, the little girl appeared at his side with a big grin on her face. You have finished already? He asked, yes, she replied. so how did you do it?

Well I saw there was a picture of a person on the other side so when I put the person together, the earth got put together (Friedman 2008: 473). The moral of the story is that when we put a person together by helping them develop and explore their mind rather than the continuous exploration of nature we save the earth from continuous degradation.

Finally, it is significant to note that the call for more individual action is not to neglect the role of groups, communities, and legal framework rather it is a call to awaken man's sense of duty to his environment. Also, this is not to undermine the significance of international legal framework and collective response but rather an attempt to ensure that individual responsibility is not a substitute for group responsibility but rather they contribute significantly in mitigating the health implication of climate change not only on women but on everyone.

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