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# CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S WORK



AUTHORS: SAYAK SINHA, DEVIKA OBERAI, SUHANI PANDEY AND DIVYA SINGH

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## **ABOUT** THE SERIES

The nature of 'work' is shifting. Various factors are changing the employment landscape, from skilling outcomes and sector-specific job creation to fertility rates and family sizes. Estimates from McKinsey & Co. suggest that globally, 40 to 160 million women may need to transition to higherskilled occupations by 2030. In India, nearly 12 million women could face job losses due to automation. Against this backdrop, what strategies can keep women in India's workforce as we confront the evolving future of work? Using secondary research and stakeholder interviews, this series highlights gender-responsive principles in various thematic areas to enable and enhance women's workforce participation.





Climate change presents a pressing global challenge that exacerbates existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting women, girls, and marginalized communities. Globally, women, due to persistent gender inequalities, face unique challenges in adapting to climate change (Integrated Research and Action for Development, 2019). In the wake of climate-induced disasters, women often have limited resources and support to rebuild livelihoods. Research shows that women's limited access to assets, financial services, and decision-making platforms hampers their ability to recover compared to men. Intergovernmental processes, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Conference of the Parties (COPs), and the Lima Work Program on Gender (LWPG, 2014) emphasise the importance of integrating gender perspectives into policies that look to address the detrimental effects of climate change. However, data on how climate change affects women's workforce participation is still limited due to a lack of sex-disaggregated data. Urgent efforts, therefore, are needed to explore the impact of climate change on women's livelihoods. Simultaneously, it is also important to advocate for policies safeguarding women's participation in existing sectors and empowering them to participate in emerging sectors.

## **WOMEN AND** CLIMATE CHANGE



Although disasters affect everyone, women experience disproportionately harsh effects due to entrenched gender inequalities. Studies show that disaster-related fatality rates are higher for women, attributed to differences in coping capacities, access to critical information, and the heavy burden of unpaid care work. For example, women comprised 61 percent of fatalities during Cyclone Nargis (Myanmar, 2008) (Myanmar: Females Hit Worst by Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar, 2008), 70–80 percent of those who died in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (Rahiem et al, 2021), and 91 percent of the victims in the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone (Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020). These numbers reflect the intersection of socio-economic, geographic, and political inequalities that heighten women's vulnerability in disasters.

In disaster scenarios, caregiving demands intensify, with women taking on even more responsibilities due to injury, displacement, or illness within households and communities, often at the expense of their wellbeing. Moreover, these added burdens frequently limit women's capacity to recover economically and socially from disaster impacts.

To address these challenges, policies must provide women with economic resources, education, and access to early warning systems and redistribute the burden of unpaid care work. Mainstreaming gender considerations into adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies will enhance the effectiveness of these efforts. Key gender-aware DRR strategies include promoting economic diversification and adopting gender-sensitive technologies, ensuring that women's livelihoods are protected in the face of increasing climate-related risks.



Women, especially those in agriculture and allied sectors, are particularly vulnerable to climate change's impacts. According to the United Nations (UN), women comprise a significant portion of the world's poor and rely heavily on natural resources threatened by climate change (UN Women Watch, 2008). The Fourth Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007) has further highlighted the profound impact of climate change on rural women in developing countries. These women, who do the majority of agricultural work and spend countless hours collecting water and fuel, face increasing challenges. Climate variability is making agriculture more unpredictable, while ongoing desertification in some regions is exacerbating the domestic fuel shortage.

Despite their substantial role in agriculture, women lack land ownership and access to farming technologies. Data from the 2015-16 Indian Agriculture Census (Government of India) shows that women own only 13.8 percent of agricultural land even as 76.2 percent of the rural female workforce is engaged in agriculture (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023). Furthermore, since women are not formally recognised as farmers by the government, they are often excluded from state and central benefits meant for agricultural landowners. This lack of recognition leaves women in agriculture more vulnerable to the impacts of rising temperatures which can reduce crop yields, and the decreasing number of rainy days which drives up the cost of agricultural commodities. With climate change, those working outdoors also face a higher risk of reduced labour productivity due to heat stress, which leads to physiological impairments.

In the fisheries and aquaculture sector, women account for 50 percent of the total workforce, while they account for 74 percent of the total workforce in allied activities like net making, marketing, processing, and related work. However, climate-induced challenges, such as droughts, reduced rainfall, and high temperatures, negatively impact women's income in these industries.

Despite the significant presence of women in agriculture, most work as labourers or cultivators without owning land. This lack of access to land ownership denies them access to resources like credit, cash, training, extension services, and farming technologies. Moreover, because the government has yet to formally recognise women as farmers, the benefits intended for landowners and farmers from state and central government programs often do not reach them. Without land ownership, women are also excluded from government compensation and relief measures for crop losses caused by climate shocks. Land ownership serves as a crucial safeguard, enabling farmers to access government support through relief packages aimed at assisting the farming community. For example, the Mukhya Mantri Kisan Sahay Yojana, launched in Gujarat on August 10, 2020, provides coverage against three major risks: drought, heavy rain, and unseasonal rain. However, only farmers who own agricultural land and hold a sanad (deed) are eligible beneficiaries. Similarly, the compensation schemes announced in Gujarat in 2020–21 as climate risk management measures for farmers were all tied to land, leaving women without land excluded from the benefits of these schemes (Vasavada, 2022).



## THE DOUBLE BURDEN OF INFORMALITY AND CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

The nature of informal work often involves strenuous physical labour in harsh environmental conditions, making informal workers highly vulnerable to heat stress or cold snaps (Kotharkar, 2022). In India, informal employment is widespread, with the majority of the labour force engaged in this sector (PLFS 2017-18 data suggests 78.4 percent of women in the workforce are employed in the urban informal sector). These women primarily work as domestic workers, street vendors, waste pickers, or are self-employed, often working out of their homes. For example, women employed as domestic workers - such as cooks - are particularly susceptible to extreme heat, especially in unventilated kitchens without fans. This exposes them not only to extreme physical discomfort, but also results in heat rashes, fatigue, dehydration, and loss of appetite. Prolonged working hours under these conditions take a toll on their health and overall wellbeing. Similarly, women street vendors experience economic hardship during heat waves, as food spoilage becomes common, reducing their income. The extreme heat also deters customers from venturing out, leading to low sales and accompanying reduction in incomes. Moreover, the lack of public toilet facilities forces women vendors to avoid drinking adequate water, leading to resulting in fatigue and dehydration.

Women waste pickers face significant risks from heatwaves as well. To escape the intense midday heat, many shift their working hours to early mornings or late evenings, which not only decreases their earnings. But also increases their exposure to urban violence, especially when navigating unsafe public spaces during non-traditional hours. Self-employed women endure considerable hardship during periods of extreme heat due to their poor living and working conditions. These challenges include limited access to drinking water, insufficient sanitation facilities in slums, prolonged exposure to direct sunlight for four to nine hours, and living in overcrowded settlements with poorly ventilated homes with inadequate roofing

materials, such as asbestos or metal GI sheets. These conditions exacerbate their vulnerability to heat stress, severely impacting their quality of life.

Women in the informal sector are further disadvantaged by a lack of social security nets, leaving them particularly vulnerable to the economic shocks brought about by climate change. The intersection of gender, poverty, and climate change creates a complex web of vulnerabilities for these women, necessitating targeted interventions and policies to build their resilience and adaptive capacity. The heightened burden of their roles, coupled with limited access to social safety nets and essential resources, exacerbates their vulnerability and severely hinders their ability to adapt to climate-related challenges.

It is important to recognise that these harsh working conditions, compounded by the growing concerns of climate change, not only affect the health of working women but also that of their dependents – both the young and the elderly – who rely on them for day-to-day care and support. Furthermore, climate disasters can have a severe impact on women's health and that of their children due to increased exposure to waterborne diseases and malnutrition, entangling women's caregiving roles with the struggle to rebuild livelihoods. This intersection of health risks, caregiving responsibilities, and economic losses leaves women particularly vulnerable to long-term socio-economic instability, further deepening gender disparities in disaster-affected regions (Goh, 2012). Additionally, social norms often limit their mobility and access to vital information and resources, making them even more vulnerable during emergencies. The multifaceted challenges posed by climate change-induced disasters directly impact women's livelihoods, reinforcing existing gender inequalities and calling for urgent, intersectional solutions.



## WOMEN IN THE GREEN ECONOMY



Women's participation in green jobs remains significantly low. Despite India increasing its renewable energy capacity by 250 percent between 2015 to 2021, women accounted for only 11 percent of the workforce in the solar rooftop sector. According to the Annual Survey of Industries 2019-20, women workers are predominantly employed in non-green industries such as apparel, textile, leather, food, and tobacco. In contrast, a 2019 report by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) reveals that men constitute 85 percent of the workforce in key sectors like infrastructure, transport, construction, and manufacturing – industries that are poised to play an important role in India's green transition. Moreover, a 2023 study by the Skill Council for Green Jobs highlights a significant skills gap, noting that 85 percent of green skills training was given only to men. Additionally, over 90 percent of women in the study reported that social norms restricted their participation in such training. These norms include stereotypes about women's unsuitability for certain technical roles, safety concerns, and lower representation in STEM subjects.

Green jobs offer women the potential to transition to more remunerative roles, thereby enhancing their livelihood security. However, the lack of skills and training limits their involvement to predominantly administrative and PR roles. The Government of India, through its Surya Mitra Scheme, has attempted to address this by providing training for women in the installation, operation, and maintenance of solar power plants and technologies. Since its launch in 2015-16, the scheme has trained 2,251 women, yet only 836 have been employed – a clear indication of the energy sector's reluctance to hire women (Skill Council for Green Jobs, 2023).

# **OPPORTUNITIES FOR** GENDER-RESPONSIVE CLIMATE TRANSITION



Given the unique challenges and needs of women, targeted interventions are crucial for addressing the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods. Additionally, a gender-responsive approach is essential for fostering employment creation and job sustainability in emerging sectors. Traditional gender norms often restrict women's participation in decision-making processes, which subsequently limits their participation in the labour force.

Below are some key opportunities and challenges in preparing women for climate-sensitive jobs:

### **1. Need for Women-led Climate Action**

Gender disparity in decision-making is particularly evident in South and Southeast Asia, where women hold only seven percent of environmental ministerial positions (Snapshot of Women's Leadership in Asia and the Pacific, n.d.). Research suggests that female leaders tend to be more supportive of climate action (Awiti, 2022), particularly in areas related to livelihood generation. The reservation of seats for women in local and national governance is a positive step in this direction, as more women in leadership roles can help catalyse gender-sensitive climate solutions (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024). However, adequate knowledge and decision-making capacities, especially at the grassroots level, must be developed for meaningful progress.

Women-led climate action also hinges on women-led research on climate mitigation and adaptation. Social norms often restrict women from pursuing roles in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, which are critical for climate solutions. Although a considerable number of women graduate

with STEM degrees (42.7 percent), far fewer (30.8 percent) choose fields like engineering, manufacturing, and construction, which are vital for a sustainable climate-responsive future. Bridging this gap requires practical learning opportunities, mentorships, scholarships, financial aid, and awareness campaigns to encourage women to pursue STEM careers. Additionally, targeted interventions must address the barriers women face in the STEM ecosystem.

#### 2. Gender-focused Climate Finance for Adaptation

Increasing adaptation finance is essential to addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women in India. Women form a significant part of the workforce in climate-vulnerable sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and informal labour. Sustainability in their sectors can be secured through dedicated adaptation efforts. Globally, it is notable that while USD 1150 billion was allocated for mitigation efforts in FY 2021-22, only USD 63 billion was directed towards adaptation. While mitigation efforts tend to create business opportunities, most women in Indi would benefit more from increased funding towards adaptation measures. In FY 2021-22, agriculture, forestry, other land use, and fisheries received only USD 7 billion, accounting for just 11 percent of the total adaptation finance. Despite a 28 percent increase from 2019-20, adaptation finance remains well below the estimated USD 212 billion needed annually by 2030 for developing countries alone. In 2021-22, 43 percent of bilateral allocable Official Allocable Assistance (ODA) had gender equality as a policy objective, amounting to USD 64.1 billion. This marked a slight decrease from 45 percent in 2019-20, with the majority of funds directed towards programs where gender equality was one of several significant policy objectives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). However, only four percent of bilateral allocable ODA was specifically dedicated to programs with gender equality as the primary focus, a figure consistent with the previous period.

In India, agriculture serves as the primary livelihood for millions of women, making them highly susceptible to climate-induced shocks such as droughts and floods, which severely affect their income and food security. Limited access to climate-resilient agricultural practices and financing further restricts women's ability to adapt. After agriculture, the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector is the second largest employer of women in India, with 20.37 percent female ownership and 24 percent of the workforce, mostly in the informal sector. This underscores the need for gender-focused financial support to help MSMEs adapt to new skills and energy resources (Chakraborty et al., 2022). Additionally, the future of sustainable textiles offers a significant opportunity to advocate for just transitions for India's 45 million textile workers to sustainable textiles and apparel. Targeted investments in gender-responsive climate action are critical to empowering women, building resilience, diversifying income sources, and enabling their meaningful participation in the green economy.

#### **3. Skill Development Initiatives**

Women currently make up about 11 percent of the workforce in the solar renewable energy sector – a figure that is slightly higher than in other energy sectors in India (Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet, 2024). Currently, there are no proactive measures and industry incentives to boost women's participation in the workforce. It is essential to introduce appropriate incentives and policies to enhance women's inclusion in both training and employment opportunities in green sectors.



## 1. Agriculture

- A. Promoting Climate Smart Agriculture: "Climate-Smart Agriculture" (CSA) is a collective term that encompasses various agricultural practices designed to be resilient to changing climatic conditions. Women usually lack access to such information, and promoting CSA can help women farmers overcome these barriers. To ensure CSA is gender-responsive, it is essential to create a gender-disaggregated database to inform targeted interventions.
- B. Alternative Livelihoods for Women: Empowering women with skills training in alternative sources of livelihood can reduce their dependence on agriculture. Programs such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission can be leveraged to equip women with the necessary skills to diversify their income sources and adapt to the changing landscape. Furthermore, skilling through Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) can help women break into non-farm activities. Government programs like the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) can be leveraged to help women acquire skills for income generation. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) could also be used to create employment opportunities for rural women while building resilience against climate variability and disasters through rural infrastructure projects.

## 2. Adaptation Finance

- A. Increasing Financing for Agriculture: The cumulative requirement for adaptation finance in the Indian agriculture sector is estimated to be approximately INR 85 lakh crore, which is insufficient for climate-proofing agriculture (Reserve Bank of India, 2024). Most sectors vulnerable to climate change fall under the State list, making it necessary for state governments to design localised interventions that address contextual. This also requires the devolution of funds from the Centre to the states, with a focus on gender-responsive climate change considerations. By increasing finance for climate-smart agriculture and social safety nets, women can be empowered to build resilience, diversify income sources, and actively participate in the green economy.
- B. Incentives for the Private Sector: The private sector plays a crucial role in bridging the finance gap between developing and developed countries in terms of climate adaptation finance. Climate-resilient innovations in policies, finance, and technology in the private sector must prioritise women's knowledge, skills, and potential contributions to solutions.

### 3. Climate Resilient Urban Systems

Urban planning must prioritize climate adaptation to safeguard the livelihoods of women in the informal economy. This includes integrating heat-resistant materials and shaded workspaces at the building level, as well as enhancing mobility and public health systems tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations. For women working in the informal sector, such as street vendors, targeted interventions like nutritional support and monetary vouchers during peak summers are critical to mitigating livelihood losses caused by extreme heat. Additionally, increasing the availability of women-only sections in public transport during peak summer months can help reduce the risks associated with prolonged heat exposure, enabling women to work safely in challenging conditions.

### 4. Social Protection for Informal Women Workers

Strengthening social protection by expanding existing government programs is essential for supporting women in the informal sector. Modifying programs like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana to include tailored provisions for informal women workers can increase accessibility. Microinsurance programs specifically designed for women caregivers, covering losses from climate-induced disasters like crop failures, livestock loss, or damage to homes, could also provide critical support.

### 5. Reducing Care Burden of Women Caregivers

Investments in essential resources like clean drinking water and clean energy are crucial. Installing community-based water points and rainwater harvesting systems can reduce the burden on women who must travel long distances for water. Subsidising clean energy resources such as solar cookers and energy-efficient stoves can minimise the time spent collecting firewood, improve health by reducing indoor air pollution, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. Women's participation in local climate governance and decision-making bodies should be encouraged to ensure their caregiving experiences inform climate adaptation strategies. Disaster preparedness plans should account for caregiving needs, including evacuation protocols, emergency healthcare, and migration support for children, the elderly, and the disabled.

#### 6. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Initiatives

To mitigate the disproportionate impact of climate disasters on women's health and livelihoods, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies must incorporate a gender-sensitive approach that addresses women's unique vulnerabilities as both caregivers and economic contributors. While essential, climate change adaptation and DRR initiatives can sometimes result in maladaptation, unintentionally exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. To prevent this, adaptation and DRR efforts must be carefully designed to meet the diverse needs of women. Climate-induced disasters such as floods, droughts, and cyclones exacerbate health risks for women and their families, increasing the incidence of malnutrition, waterborne diseases, and maternal and child mortality. These challenges further strain women's livelihoods as they must balance caregiving responsibilities with the economic recovery of efforts, such as agriculture and small-scale enterprises. DRR policies should include the establishment of women-centered health services in disaster-prone areas to ensure access to maternal and child healthcare, mental health support, and nutrition services during crises. Integrating women into local disaster preparedness committees and decision-making bodies will ensure that DRR strategies are informed by their lived experiences, enhancing overall community resilience.

#### 7. Supporting Gender-Sensitive Research Initiatives

In collaboration with academic institutions, NGOs, and international organizations, the government should fund and promote research to generate comprehensive, gender-disaggregated data on how climate change uniquely impacts women. Establishing gender-sensitive indicators to track the effectiveness of climate adaptation and mitigation efforts is essential. Regular monitoring and evaluation, backed by rigorous research, will ensure that policies remain responsive to gender-specific needs and adjust as necessary over time.

#### 8. Women in STEM

Increasing women's participation in STEM fields is key to developing gender-responsive climate policies and interventions. Women trained in science and technology can bring in essential innovations to address the unique needs of those impacted by climate change. Moreover, women leaders in STEM can serve as role models, inspiring younger generations to pursue careers in these critical fields. By empowering women in these areas, we enhance our capacity to address the complex challenges of climate change.

- A. Encourage and Promote Female Role Models: Increasing the visibility of successful women in STEM fields through mentorship programs, panel discussions, seminars, and workshops can inspire more women to enter these sectors.
- B. Increase Representation in Decision-making: Increasing women's representation in governing boards, committees, and leadership positions will promote decision-making focused on gender-responsive climate action (World Bank, 2023). This inclusive system will enable the creation of knowledge specifically tailored to women's needs and the challenges they face due to climate change. Diversity in decision-making leads to better outcomes, ensuring that women's perspectives are considered in climate solutions.



To achieve gender equality and safeguard livelihoods in the context of climate change, it is essential to align social and economic policies. While traditional economic policies focus on growth, and social policies address inequality, a more comprehensive approach is needed – one that integrates gender considerations and social justice. This approach requires collaborative efforts from governments at all levels - national, state, and local - alongside private sector engagement that actively incorporates gender into decision-making processes.

It is crucial to recognise the differential impacts of climate change on men and women, particularly in terms of economic, social, and health outcomes. Although some initial efforts have been made to address these disparities, achieving real progress will demand both creativity and commitment. This policy brief is intended to support policymakers and stakeholders by offering insights from relevant research and suggesting pathways for the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies. These policies aim to ensure a just and equitable transition in the face of climate change.

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**IWWAGE** M-6, 2nd Floor, Hauz Khas, New Delhi – 110 016 Phone: +91 11 4909 6529



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