

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A DRIVER FOR GENDER INEQUALITY

PRESS STATEMENT: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2022

Introduction

Uganda Women's Network joins the global community in commemorating International Women's Day (IWD) which falls on 8th March of each year; IWD is a day dedicated to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. This year is being celebrated under the theme: ***"Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow."*** This year's theme is a recognition of the contribution of women and girls around the world, in leading the charge on climate change adaptation, mitigation, and response, to build a more sustainable future for all.

Climate change, according to the UN, refers to long-term shifts in temperature and weather patterns¹. Today, the effects of climate change can be seen and felt throughout the world from increased occurrences of hurricanes and storms to wildfires and flooding, to drought and disease epidemics. All of which come at the cost of socio-economic development. Women are increasingly being recognized as more vulnerable to climate change impacts than men, as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent on the natural resources which climate change threatens the most.

Uganda as a state party to the United Nations, is obliged under Sustainable Development Goal 13 to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts". Dealing with and responding to climate change are critical to achieving gender equality which is in SDG 5.

Overview of climate change and the environment in Uganda

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>

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Uganda's climate is characterised by distinct rainy and dry seasons. Overall, 15.3 percent of the country is covered by open fresh water sources (rivers, lakes, streams and swamps). However, despite her water-rich status, there is a severe reduction in the forest cover as well as wetland degradation and encroachment. Consequently, Uganda has in recent years experienced significant impacts of climate change², which include changing weather patterns, erratic temperature, drops in water levels, and increased frequency of extreme weather events like floods, prolonged dry spells, drought. The social economic impacts of this makes communities especially women and girls very vulnerable due to displacement, loss of livelihoods.

Climate change, gender and gender inequality

A study conducted by the Ministry of Water and Environment titled: '*Gender and Climate Change: Assessing Impacts and Strategies for Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change in Uganda*' revealed that due to their traditional responsibilities, women are hardest hit by climate changes, notably food insecurity and water shortage. Women and men experience climate change impacts differently due to differences in socio-economic status, age, and dis(ability), among others. This may be attributed to women's heavier reliance on natural resources and on the roles of women and men play in natural resource management. These differences only push women, especially the already marginalised such as the elderly, Women with Disabilities (WWD), the poor, and women living in rural areas further to the side-lines and widens gender disparities.

Gender inequality and climate change are therefore inseparable because environmental degradation places women in a vicious cycle of poverty and dependency, hindering their sustainable development. Actions to achieve SDG 13 targets on combating climate change cannot, and should not be taken without due

² <https://www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/allwebsitemedia/30whatwedo/climatechange/Uganda-Country-Climate-Action-Reports-2016.pdf>

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attention to the country's commitment to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE).

A snapshot of the gender inequality issues

The existing gendered roles and rising demands of unpaid care work

For generations, women and girls have experienced inequalities, however, with the adversities caused by climate change, the demands of unpaid care work are more likely to increase for women and girls. Typically, in Uganda women and girls dominate care roles and domestic work in their communities. This includes preparing meals, washing clothes, cleaning the houses etc. All these activities require water. The reduction in water levels as a result of climate change forces women and girls to travel greater distances to access clean water. It also forces women to spend more time harvesting water, instead of engaging in economic activities

The water, sanitation and health factor

Uganda has in the last two decades experienced receding and rising water levels, which have both been devastating. For example, between 2004 – 2006, water levels in Lake Victoria dropped by 1.5m. Since 2019, rising temperatures in the Indian Ocean have led to intense and prolonged rainfall in the country, causing water levels in many rivers and lakes to rise to unprecedented highs unseen since the 1960s. Decades ago, Uganda's wetlands were able to absorb such flooding. However, the extensive infrastructural development especially in urban areas have caused the country's wetlands to dwindle. The result has been extreme flooding which brings with it human displacement and destruction of homes and property including gardens. Women and girls experience the worst of flooding and water scarcity, since their reproductive, productive and community management role isn't inevitably stopped by such crises.

Relatedly, access to safe water is directly complementary to sanitation. During heavy rainfall and floods, the resultant overflow of human waste increases the population's vulnerability to water-borne diseases. Less water, on the other hand, implies increased

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health risks such as cholera, dysentery and other diseases related to dry conditions. These health care demands fall on women who are primary patient care givers, spending scarce monetary resources on treatment or walking long hours to fetch water.

Climate change and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAW/G)

Climate change is rarely discussed in relation to violence against women yet the relationship between natural disasters, the breakdown in family, community/societal order and support structures is directly linked. This increases the risk to women and girls of physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse through denial of resources or necessary services. It is not uncommon to find women and girls forced into marriage or unwanted sexual relations in a bid to make ends meet during periods of prolonged food insecurity, or shortage of natural resources. For young girls, child marriage and trafficking to cater for their families' needs is a real threat.

The way forward

UWONET applauds the Government of Uganda for steps taken thus far to mitigate and reverse the effects of climate change. One such step is the Cabinet directive to the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to cancel all titles issued in wetlands on public land acquired unlawfully after 1995. This however is not enough to prevent, reverse, mitigate the impacts of climate change and address the emerging widening gender gap. In that regard;

Recognising women's triple gender roles of reproduction, economic and social roles, and their responsibilities including providing for their households and engagement in livelihood strategies that make them the cornerstone of household welfare; **UWONET hereby makes the following demands;**

1. The Government of Uganda through the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development should invest resources in the promotion, development and uptake by communities of clean, renewable and affordable energy such as solar

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thermal energy and biogas. This will not only to reduce oil consumption and carbon dioxide emissions, but will also reduce the demands of care work.

2. The Government of Uganda through the Parliament and the Ministry of Water and Environment should increase resources for mitigation, adaptation, climate change finance, technology that reduce the burden on the environment
3. The Government of Uganda and development actors should include women in implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation plans such as; tree planting, restoration of wetlands, use of renewable energy, e.t.c.
4. The Government of Uganda through NEMA should strengthen legal and policy enforcement to restore ecosystems such as wetlands through the implementation of catchment-based systems, gazettement of vital wetlands for increased protection and monitoring and inspecting restored ecosystems.
5. The Government of Uganda through NEMA must ensure the mainstreaming of gender into adaptation and mitigation measures. This is because females comprise 51.19% of the national population and play an important role in the social and environmental decision-making arena.
6. The Government of Uganda should take deliberate steps to enhance the leadership and participation of women in the boards, institutions and bodies to influence decisions on mitigation, adaptation, climate change finance, technology and capacity building
7. The Government of Uganda should put in place an improved early warning systems and information dissemination to minimize the risk of damage and death, from natural disasters.

UNITED WOMEN CAN!

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