



## Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Women and Climate Change: Impact and Agency

Launch of Report: “Women and Climate Change: Impact and Agency in Human Rights, Security and Economic Development”

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Keynote Address by Mary Robison, President, Mary Robison Foundation  
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I am delighted to be back here at the Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and particularly glad to be speaking on the impact of climate change on women and the role of women’s agency in tackling climate change.

I would like to congratulate Ambassador Melanne Verweir, Mayesha, Rukmani and Briana for producing the very comprehensive report being launched here today on women and climate change. Ambassador Verweir is a strong advocate in the fight for gender equality and particularly as it relates to climate change. I claim a small part in that. I remember urging Melanne, when she was United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, to come to the Conference of Parties in Durban in 2011 and help me get gender equality on the agenda. Thankfully she understood the importance of addressing gender equality as part of our response to climate change.

In Durban, we co-hosted an event which we called *Unlocking the Potential of Women to Combat Climate Change: Moving from Words to Action*. This event provided the space for a meaningful dialogue on women’s role in climate action and Ambassador Verweir’s presence further underscored the importance of this issue. The following year, at COP 18 in Doha, we arrived at Decision 23/CP.18 – otherwise known as the Doha Miracle. It was an agreement adopted by the Parties on achieving gender balance in negotiations – an agreement to put women's needs in climate change policy on an equal footing with those of men.

Ensuring that women's voices are heard and their priorities supported is central to realising climate justice. Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable, including women, and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.

Around the world climate change is exacerbating existing social inequalities, leaving women disproportionately vulnerable to climate impacts. This is an injustice which must be remedied.

Women constitute 50% of the world's population and the majority of the world's poor. Over 60% of the people living on less than one US dollar a day in Sub-Saharan Africa are women. Poverty increases their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. For example, women are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change<sup>1</sup>. Women are often constrained in their response to sudden onset disasters such as floods and cyclones. During natural disasters, women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men<sup>2</sup>. The report launched here today outlines in great detail the gender impacts of climate change as they relate to a wide range of such impacts. The great value of this report as an advocacy tool is that it sets out clearly why we need to ensure we have gender responsive climate actions.

In some areas we have made strides in advancing gender equality. Earlier this year UN Women released a report on progress since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for action, which notes that in many countries there are now better laws to promote gender equality and address violence against women and girls. Girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education has increased; women are participating more actively in the labour force, especially in Latin America; and most regions have made progress in increasing women's access to contraception with remarkable progress in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women Fact Sheet, Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change, available at [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/downloads/Women\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Factsheet.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Soroptimist International of the Americas (2011), WHITE PAPER: Reaching Out to Women When Disaster, available at <http://www.soroptimist.org/whitepapers/whitepaperdocs/wpreachingwomendisaster.pdf>

However the report also notes that overall progress has been lacking for the most marginalised women and girls. It states that “*Deep-seated discriminatory norms, stereotypes and violence remain pervasive, evidencing gender-based discrimination that continues to be deeply entrenched in the minds of individuals, institutions and societies.*” This is a sad indictment of the world we live in. This year we mark 70 years of the United Nations, 20 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for action, 15 years of the Millennium Development Goals and 15 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It shows us we still have much to do to achieve gender equality in all areas not just climate actions.

Thankfully, awareness is increasing about the linkages between achieving gender equality and addressing climate change. 20 years ago, the Governments which adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified “*women and the environment*” as one of the 12 critical areas of concern. However, climate change was not mentioned as an issue to be addressed or as a threat to the realisation of all human rights, including women’s rights and women’s empowerment. Today, in 2015, we know better. We are aware that the impacts of climate change are different for women and men, with women likely to bear the greater burden in situations of poverty. Climate change is undermining the enjoyment of human rights, especially for people on the frontline of the climate crisis – those who have contributed least to the causes of climate change.

Yet there is a positive side to this story. Too often women are categorised as vulnerable with little acknowledgement that they can - and already do - offer solutions. We know that women can be powerful agents of change. Women across all sectors of society are already leading the way in efforts to build resilience and adapt to the impacts of climate change. They are demonstrating their unity, collective ambition and their willingness to act with urgency, regardless of their societal or political position. At local and community level, women are driving innovative climate action and their participation in the ongoing climate debate will be critical.

In February this year my Foundation, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Chile Office, convened a roundtable discussion in Santiago, Chile. The roundtable, 'Women's Participation: Learning from Community Experiences' was an opportunity to exchange experience and knowledge on addressing climate change between grassroots representatives, in particular women, engaged in climate action, and representatives of local and national government, with international organisations involved in the design and implementation of climate policy. Also present were members of the Troika+ of Women Leaders on Gender and Climate Change; a network of women leaders and supportive men committed to working together on gender and climate change. I was very glad that Ambassador Verveer was one of the Troika + in a position to attend. This round table was a real example of climate justice in action. We listened to women from local communities who told us not only of the challenges they were facing, but how they were participating in the design and implementation of climate actions in their communities.

One of the women was Celia Reyes who, through her participation in her neighbourhood organisation, was able to help tailor the development of a Rainwater Harvest Project which was introduced in her community. Drawing on both the traditional techniques already used by the families, of which Celia had an extensive knowledge, and the technical skills and expertise of the partner organisations the project was implemented successfully and resulted in increased food security and household income . This increased Celia's resilience to the impacts of climate change, as well as that of her community. Including Celia in the design and implementation of this climate action resulted in increased benefits for her all.

The round table in Santiago was important - not only for us as women leaders, to hear the challenges and actions been taken at the local level - but also for the women and men whom we heard from. They were empowered by the experience; they had not had the opportunity to engage in this type of dialogue before. I was delighted when during the roundtable discussion, the Under-Secretary of the Chilean Ministry of Energy made a commitment on behalf of her Ministry to have further discussions - similar to the roundtable - involving community members and representatives. We need others with decision making power to

follow suit and enable meaningful participation of women in the design, planning and implementation of climate policy.

My Foundation recently carried out a study to document the positive impacts of women's participation in the design and implementation of climate actions. We wanted to highlight the benefits of women's participation in the development of gender-responsive climate action. Unfortunately the evidence base on the benefits of women's participation in climate actions is limited. There are two conclusions to be drawn from this lack of evidence. Firstly that there are not enough efforts to enable women's participation in climate actions, and secondly that not enough is being done to document best practice where actions are taking place to enable women's meaningful participation in climate actions. I would like to challenge you as students, researchers and policy makers to help us make the case for women's participation – we need more documentation and research to prove the benefits of women's participation.

Enabling women's participation is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do. While the evidence base is small it highlights that the participation of women in the design of climate actions results in actions which are successful and better for people and planet. For example, countries with higher female parliamentary representation are more likely to ratify international environmental treaties<sup>3</sup>. This translates to the local level also; evidence shows that women's inclusion in leadership positions results in improved outcomes. Women's greater participation in the governance structure of an institution protecting a community resource, such as a forest, leads to better resource conservation and regeneration, and women's presence on executive committees of community forest management groups assists in improving forest quality due to more acceptable rules of extraction and protection<sup>4</sup>.

We must enable women's meaningful participation, at all levels. Too often we can allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of success when we count numbers alone. Gender parity

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP (2011), Human Development Report. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All. United Nations Development Programme. New York.

<sup>4</sup> Agarwal, B. (2009), "Gender and Forest Conservation: The Impact of Women's Participation in Community Forest Governance." *Ecological Economics* 68 (11): 2785–99

is important but the barriers do not disappear once women reach the decision making table. This can be particularly true at grassroots level, where women's participation can be tokenistic or where they are allocated gender stereotypical roles as organisers. To address this requires us to examine and understand the barriers to women's participation. These reasons are complex and multi-faceted. However our study has shown us that taking the time to understand the context in relation to women's ability to participate has real pay offs, and can lead to meaningful change in women's empowerment. Targeted capacity building is central. In order to fully support women's participation in decision-making processes, the necessary resources, knowledge, training and supportive environment should be provided. This is especially important at local level.

This year we have a great opportunity to advance women's participation and gender responsive climate actions within the international processes. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in New York last month provided one such opportunity. Not only do we have Goal 5 "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" which should be applied across all the SDGs, but we also have under the Climate change SDG Goal 13b "Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities". This speaks to climate justice and I am very happy to see it included.

Within the climate negotiations we also have opportunities. The Lima Work Programme on Gender, launched at the COP in Lima last December, is an important process in supporting the implementation of gender-responsive climate policies across all areas of negotiations. The Work Programme is important in that it focuses not just on enhancing gender balance and women's participation in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) delegations, boards and bodies, it will also look at how to incorporate gender considerations in climate change activities.

On Monday 19<sup>th</sup> October climate negotiators will reconvene in Bonn, Germany for the final 5 days of negotiations before the Climate Conference begins in Paris at the end of November. In Paris world leaders will have an opportunity to adopt a legally binding climate agreement that addresses the scale of climate action required. The inclusion of a gender equality and human rights framing in the Paris agreement is key to enabling climate justice. At the last negotiating session I was heartened to hear many countries and negotiating blocs calling for the inclusion of gender equality and human rights language. And while the current draft text for negotiation does not include these provisions, I am hopeful that the final agreement reached will include gender equality and human rights language. World leaders have a moral duty to ensure this is the case, motivated by the injustice of the impacts of climate change and the opportunity to shape a fairer and safer world.

Undoubtedly gender equality is easier to talk about than it is to achieve. But women must be enabled to participate in decision-making processes of climate actions across all levels, local, national and international. Achieving gender equality is not just an issue for women and girls, it requires the involvement of women and men, girls and boys and is the responsibility of all. Let's not forget we cannot achieve sustainable development if we don't meaningfully include half the world's population.

I would like to end with a quote from a somewhat unusual source Kemal Ataturk, a leader who did a great amount from women's civil and political rights:

*“Humankind is made up of two sexes, women and men. Is it possible for humankind to grow by the improvement of only one part while the other part is ignored? Is it possible that if half of a mass is tied to earth with chains that the other half can soar into skies?”*

Thank you.

