



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 December 2021

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-sixth session

14–25 March 2022

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Human Rights Advocates Inc., a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Disproportional Impact of Climate Change on Women

The Commission on the Status of Women's sixty-sixth session will focus on gender equality in the context of climate change and disaster risk reduction policies. Climate change is causing an increase in natural disasters. These natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, the 2003 European Heatwave, and Cyclone Nargis, have adversely and disproportionately affected women because they tend to be more vulnerable, die at higher rates, have less access to resources, experience more violence compared to men.

Climate change is partially a result of human activities and has led to things such as increased carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere (National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA, *The Causes of Climate Change*; IPCC, *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report Summary for Policymakers*, p. 5.). According to NASA, humans have caused the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ to increase by forty-eight percent since 1760. (NASA, *The Causes of Climate Change*.) Global warming itself has been observed since the mid-twentieth century, and, according to NASA, scientists are crediting that to "the human expansion of the 'greenhouse effect.'" (Id.) Activities, like burning fossil fuels, have been a major contributor to the increase in CO₂. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations' body for climate change, reported that "there's a more than 95 percent probability that human activities over the past 50 years have warmed our planet" and that human produced CO₂ is one of the causes of that. (Id.)

When the climate changes, the frequency of natural disasters also increases. (IPCC, *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report Summary for Policymakers*, p.6.) The IPCC states that "[i]t is likely that human influence has more than doubled the probability of [the] occurrence[s] of heat waves in some locations." (Id.) In addition to heat waves, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) states that climate change increases the possibility of droughts and the intensity of storms. (USGS, *How can climate change affect natural disasters?*) The increase in global temperature can cause more powerful storms, higher wind speeds, and more powerful waves. (Id.) The IPCC states that there have been many extreme weather events observed since 1950 and the UN has stated that the number of people who have endured floods and cyclones has doubled. (UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian action*, 2017.)

Women tend to be disproportionately affected by natural disasters compared to men because women tend to be poorer, more dependent on threatened natural resources, and have different social roles than men. (UN Chronicle, *Women ... In The Shadow of Climate Change*.) Around seventy percent of those living in poverty are women. (Id.) Furthermore, women's different roles and responsibilities limit their access to resources like land, credit, technology, and training services. (Id.) When natural disasters do hit, women tend to do more work securing the household and therefore have less time for education and work outside the home. This can prevent women from seeking help, eating enough food, obtaining clean water, and migrating. (UN Chronicle, *Women ... In The Shadow of Climate Change*; UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian action*, 2017; WHO Gender, *Climate Change and Health*, 2005, p. 7.) Natural disasters also affect young girls: for example, in droughts, girls are more likely to miss school than boys so that they can collect water for their families. (UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian action*, 2017.)

Women's particular vulnerability in light of natural disasters has been demonstrated time and time again across the world. Droughts, storms, and floods tend to kill more women than men. In Bangladesh women are less likely to be able to swim

or leave their homes and are therefore adversely affected during monsoon season since they cannot escape. (Id.) Furthermore, more than seventy percent of those who died in the 2004 tsunami in one province of Indonesia were women. (Id.) This is not a recent development. For example, in the 1991 cyclone and the 1998 floods in Bangladesh, women and girls were more adversely affected than men and boys. (WHO, *Gender and health in Natural Disasters*, 2005, p. 8.) In 1991, more women died because they were waiting for their husbands to return home and make an evacuation decision. (Id.) In 1998 girls experienced urinary tract infections and rashes because they could not wash their menstrual rags properly. (Id.) In addition to these situations, women suffered more than men during Hurricane Katrina, the 2003 Heatwave, and Cyclone Nargis.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the United States and predominantly affected African American women. (UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian action*, 2017.) These women were already some of the poorest and more marginalized people and therefore faced some of the greatest challenges to survival. (WHO Gender, *Climate Change and Health*, 2005, p. 6.) In New Orleans, women made up about eighty percent of the people left behind when Hurricane Katrina hit even though women only comprise fifty-four percent of the population. (Butterbaugh, *Why Did Hurricane Katrina Hit Women So Hard?* 2005, p. 17.) Many could not afford to evacuate and those left behind struggled to obtain relief resources, endured more sexual assault in the shelters where people were sent after the storm, and experienced general domestic violence. (Id.) Women reporting an increased number of rapes is, unfortunately, not unusual in natural disasters. The UN has reported that the likelihood of rape, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections rise during natural disasters. (UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian action*, 2017.)

In 2003, France was hit by a heatwave that resulted in over 15,000 deaths. (Fouillet, et. al., *Excess mortality related to the August 2003 heat wave in France*, 2007.) Studies after the heatwave found that mortality rates increased with age and with gender – the overall mortality rate was seventy-five percent higher for women than for men and fifteen percent higher for those over fifty-five years of age. (Id.) The EuroHEAT project suggested that this increased mortality rate could be due to the fact that elderly women tend to live alone and suffer from different health problems than men. (D’Ippoliti, et. al., *The impact of heat waves on mortality in 9 European cities: results from the EuroHEAT project*, 2010.) The World Health Organization’s takeaway from this natural disaster was that women are more at risk of dying from a heatwave than men. (WHO Gender, *Climate Change and Health*, 2005, p. 4.)

In 2008, more women were adversely affected by Cyclone Nargis than men in Myanmar. (Makiwa, *Myanmar Cyclone Nargis: One year on enormous challenges to recovery remain*, 2009.) More than 84,000 people were killed during the cyclone, but the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) stated that sixty-one percent of those were women. (Macan-Maker, *Myanmar: Females hit worst by Cyclone Nargis*, 2008.) In some villages, twice as many women died than men and more girls below the age of five died than boys. (Id.) In addition to having a higher mortality rate, many women, about eighty-seven percent of unmarried and one-hundred percent of married women, lost their main source of income during this natural disaster. (UN Women, *Facts and figures: Humanitarian Action*, 2017.) Now, about fourteen percent of households are headed by women, mostly widows, and are more vulnerable to poverty and have less protection than male-headed households. (Women’s Protection Assessments: *Post Cyclone Nargis, Myanmar*, 2008.) This also led to many girls who reside in female-headed households dropping out of school to support their families with along with their mothers. (Id.)

In conclusion, climate change is caused by man-made pollutants, which in turn increases the frequency of natural disasters. These disasters affect women disproportionately compared to men. Hurricane Katrina, the 2003 Heat Wave, and Cyclone Nargis, illustrated that women tend to die at higher rates, have less access to resources, experience more rapes, and are more vulnerable in the future. However, the data on women in natural disasters is still extremely limited. It is necessary that the UN take steps to collect more data on women's experiences, increase aid, and increase protection during times of natural disasters and, based on its findings, urge States to address the sources of increasing climate change.
