



The new global climate change Agreement: what place for gender and human rights?

Whilst [the Population and Sustainable Development Alliance \(PSDA\)](#) welcomes the newly adopted ambitious global agreement on climate change, the lack of reference to human rights and gender equality in key operative clauses of the agreement is a disappointment. This is symptomatic of a wider absence of parties' recognition of the situation of women and girls around the world already experiencing the harrowing effects of climate change and the detriment caused to their sexual and reproductive health, overall well-being and their ability to adapt.

What the agreement does

Many people around the world have hailed the new agreement on climate change, approved by 195 countries, as a historic one. Indeed it is the first agreement that commits nearly every country in the world to recognize and commit to lowering planet warming greenhouse gas emissions in order to avoid the most dramatic forms of climate change. The document states the planet's warming should be limited to "well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels," and that nations should try to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. This is a "powerful signal" as US President Barack Obama put it, but the real results will be determined by the countries and their national actions in the realization of the Agreement.

What it does not do

Global climate trends appear to show that neither of the temperature goals - 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius - will be met by the national plans submitted by almost all countries ahead of the Paris conference. Instead, these Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) indicate the earth's average temperature by the end of this century will be close to 2.7 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Environmental experts say that the commitments made under the new agreement will cut global Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions by half of what is necessary to avoid what a 2 degree plus increase in temperatures will entail, namely rising sea levels, severe droughts, stronger storms and flooding, and wide spread food and water shortages. What the negotiators, from developed countries and the outspoken oil and petroleum exporting countries in particular, fail to acknowledge, is that these dramatic weather events are already taking place in many countries around the world. From the devastation caused throughout south-east Asia by Typhoon Hainan in 2013, to the catastrophic drought in Ethiopia throughout this year, and the recent widespread flooding in Chennai, India.

The current climate crisis is a human rights crisis, as the effects of climate change violate people's rights to housing, safety, survival, food, water, and health. However, this is not reflected in the agreement, which only refers explicitly to the right to health, the rights of indigenous people and migrants, among others, in the non-binding preamble, and thus not in the operational text.

"The fact that human rights were actively deleted from the article of the agreement that describes its entire purpose sends a clear message to the world that climate change is merely a technical issue. But if we are not combatting and adapting to climate change for the

sake of people, then who are we doing it for?" says Ida Klockmann, Advocacy Officer at the Danish Family Planning Association and chair of PSDA.

Women are on the [front lines](#) of climate change; as food and water shortages become more severe, women travel greater distances to collect essential resources like water, firewood and food to support their families, they are often threatened and abused. Gendered issues like these are not specified in the Paris Agreement, and that is problematic for two reasons:

One is that women and girls are more likely to suffer from the effects of climate change than their male counterparts. This is due to several reasons, including their greater vulnerability and health needs in natural disasters and in refugee situations.

Carina Hirsch, Advocacy and Policy Manager at the [Population and Sustainability Network](#), PSDA Secretariat, says "there is nothing *natural* about natural disasters; they affect women and men very differently due to the social, economic and cultural constructs. We cannot continue to ignore gender and health dimensions in climate change discussions".

The response to Typhoon Hainan failed to be gender sensitive; there were no sanitary items in the relief kits. The drought caused by the El Nino dry spell in Ethiopia is threatening the lives of over 10 million people, with women and girls at greatest risk. The extreme weather events in Bangladesh and India are also putting many young girls at risk of being married off as child brides. Young girls' and women's sexual and reproductive health and their overall wellbeing are being seriously limited and violated in such situations. Alison Marshall, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Senior Advocacy Adviser, says "ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights is key to enabling families to adapt to climate change". These and other serious health consequences of climate change, are largely absent from the deal and were not the subject of any negotiations. This is cause for concern given that climate change has been labelled the greatest threat to public health of the 21st century.

Secondly, women and gender issues should have featured more strongly in the article about adaptation; we believe this reflects a failure to recognize the potential of women and girls in adapting to a changing climate. PSDA member organization the [Asia Pacific Research and Research Centre \(ARROW\)](#), affirms "there must be widespread recognition of the often pivotal role women play in adapting to climate change, acting as powerful agents of change at the household, community, and national levels".

What it should have done

The Paris Agreement will govern global action against climate change from 2020 onwards. From the perspective of PSDA, which works on the linkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights and sustainability issues, Paris represents a missed opportunity for an agreement based on human rights that includes strong references to gender equality and health throughout the operative text, and robust mechanisms to hold developed nations accountable to their commitments to combat climate change. However, Negash Teklu, Director and Founder of Population, Health and Environment Ethiopia Consortium, sums up the Paris agreement as "a step in the right direction in order to do what science is advising and what justice is demanding".

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