How Climate Change Disproportionately Affects Women in Rural Areas

‘How do we cook without water?’

As climate change accelerates, rural women find themselves disproportionately affected by its harsh realities, yet their daily struggles often go unnoticed. From extreme droughts to other unpredictable weather patterns, the gendered impact of climate change on rural communities is a silent crisis. Members of the Rural Action for Climate Change (RACR) project are urgently calling for solutions that address women’s vulnerabilities in the climate crisis and that empower women to be able to adapt to and respond to the effects of climate change.

In South Africa, rural women are bearing the brunt of both domestic and environmental challenges. They have primary responsibility for providing food and care, yet climate change has made these duties even more difficult. Declining water resources, rising temperatures, and unpredictable crop yields, which worsens these pressures, pushing women to their limits.

Asiphumze Luthuli from Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre in the Eastern Cape, and Youth Ambassador for Climate Change in the RACR project says, “Many of these women don’t realise they are the most vulnerable”, which also emphasises the lack of climate education and awareness.

In communities like Mount Frere, access to basic resources like water and healthcare is already limited. With rivers drying up, women are forced to manage their households with fewer resources. “When it’s too hot, the water in our rivers dries out. How do we cook without water? How can we wash clothes?”, Luthuli adds. The climate-induced scarcity of resources intensifies daily challenges, from basic survival to caregiving.

Compounding this issue is the lack of access to healthcare. In emergency situations, damaged gravel and flooded roads make it impossible to reach aid in time, putting the lives of women and their families at risk. Luthuli shares the heart-wrenching reality: pregnant women in labour are often left stranded, unable to get the urgent care they need.

One of the most alarming consequences of climate-induced stress is the rise in gender-based violence where patriarchal systems remain strong. As climate change increases economic strain, there are documented cases of domestic violence as a result of extreme weather impacts. In parts of society where men are still expected to be the breadwinners, and women the caretakers, resource shortages often lead to conflict and at times violence against women, trapping families in cycles of poverty and abuse. Additionally, with climate change disrupting access to basic requirements like water and firewood, women have to travel further and are more exposed to gender-based violence outside their homes as well.

Despite these challenges, hope exists.

Women-led organisations like the Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre and the Interchurch Local Development Agency in the Eastern Cape are working tirelessly to integrate gender perspectives into climate action. These groups, with young resilient women like Asiphumze Luthuli and Lisakhanya Nqeleni, are ensuring that rural women's voices are heard in decision-making spaces. However, they need greater support to scale their efforts.

"Women are left out when it comes to making decisions related to climate change adaptation and mitigation, limiting their ability to influence solutions that affect them directly", says Lisakhanya Nqeleni from the Interchurch Local Development Agency in Uitenhage, and another Youth Ambassador for Climate Change. By offering leadership training, capacity-building, and climate awareness, these organisations are helping rural women become leaders in their communities.

The road to change, however, is long and requires collaboration from all sectors.

To build sustainable structures in rural communities, women must be encouraged to share their experiences and work together. Only by amplifying their voices and integrating them into climate solutions can we begin to level the playing field for rural women and help communities build climate resilience.

The gendered impacts of climate change are undeniable, and it's clear that sustainable rural development can only be achieved if women are part of the conversation. If left out, we risk leaving half the population behind in the fight against climate change. It's time to address the specific needs and contributions of women in climate policies—because, without them, rural resilience will continue to be an uphill battle.

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The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project empowers rural communities in South Africa to build resilience against climate change. By partnering with community-based organisations and faith leaders, RACR enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural populations, particularly in the Eastern, Western, Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape provinces. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland