

Achieving gender equality and autonomy of all women and girls in the context of policies and programs related to climate change, the environment and the disaster risk reduction

From the youth movement, what actions do you propose to incorporate gender equality in policies and initiatives related to climate change? What do you consider to be the challenges facing young people to participate in these spaces?

YPACC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. I am heartened by the opportunity to provide feedback on the document and share insights from my work and experiences. The comprehensive document, *Achieving gender equality and autonomy of all women and girls in the context of policies and programs related to climate change, the environment and the disaster risk reduction*, thoroughly captured some of the most salient details related to the issues being examined. It presents a rich, well-researched analytical article on the theme.

We affirm the gains towards gender equality resulting from the work of critical agencies over the years. Additionally, we acknowledge and applaud the work of activists and advocates before us who have helped to create more livable societies for us through their work- safer, more equal and more just societies. Despite the existing gaps and challenges we are aware that without the work of our predecessors our societies would 'be worse off'. Nonetheless, it is important to note that with the evolution of our societies has come new and emerging challenges that require innovative solutions to maintain and build on the gender gains of the last few decades. Climate change and covid – twin dimensions of the adverse effects of capitalism and patriarchy – represent the most recent threats to women and girls in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Girls is not a homogenous group and as such decision-makers must further disaggregate this group to address nuances and variations across class, colour, geography and sexual orientation. Planning at the regional, national and subnational levels must acknowledge these variations or it will continue to exclude the most vulnerable cross-sections of this demographic. Additionally, girls should not be subsumed by or used interchangeably with women. We must consider the specific experiences and needs of girls

Situational Analysis

The region has a culture of silencing girls, labelling of girls as uncontrollable, early initiation of girls into sexual activity and historically has had high rates of teenage pregnancy. These cultural normative must be challenged as part of any process to promote girls' participation and access. Similarly, concerns about gender disparities are often disregarded on the basis of the high rates of enrolment of girls in tertiary level education is often cited as evidence that girls are 'doing well'. I would like to point to the fact that in some countries young women with university degrees are still earning less than male counterparts with only secondary level qualifications. In my opinion, this is one of the most obvious manifestations of a structural barrier to gender equity and evidence of a 'gender issue'. The evidence is clear, these and other systemic gender inequities will exacerbate climate impacts on women, girls and other vulnerable groups. We have seen with Covid-19 the extent of the price to be paid when we fail to address prevailing socio-economic inequities.

COVID: a dress rehearsal for climate change

Covid has been deemed a dress rehearsal for climate change. The nexus between the two are seen in the root causes both crises and in the ways in which they have unfolded globally. There have been reports of high rates of absenteeism of girls from school, increased rates of teenage pregnancy and increased participation of young women and girls in transactional sexual relations. The responses by

some regional governments will increase girls' vulnerability to climate change due to policy responses which were stagnant and path dependent, regressive or in some instances expanded State control thereby stifling democracy and social justice. These actions are cause for concern should it be an indication of what might obtain with a worsening of the climate crisis. Going forward, countries must consider the ways in which the pandemic has disproportionately affected girls and young women and must tailor response measures to address these impacts.

Extractive Industries

It is important that in its quest to rebuild economies in the wake of fallouts due to the pandemic, that governments consider the ways in which fiscal decisions and proposed economic activities impact women and girls. Recent indications are that some countries are moving quickly to resume activities in mining for example, despite significant push back from many factions, including economists and environmentalists. Not only is the EI a male dominated space, with systemic barriers to women's entry, it adversely impacts the sexual and reproductive health of young women and girls in the often-rural communities where they exist. The disproportionate impacts on indigenous populations must also be noted. Governments that are pursuing these measures in contravention of commitments made under other agreements, must be held accountable- and the voices of women and girls asking for more innovative, climate sensitive and gender just approaches to economic renewal must be centered in these conversations.

Just transition

Many Caribbean countries are pivoting towards a phase out of fossil fuels- a commendable aim. Countries have put forward ambitious targets for discontinuing use of fossil fuels over the next 2 decades. This has given birth to the just transition concept which seeks to ensure that the shift to renewables and clean energy sources is inclusive and just. Current realities of girls, poor girls, rural girls; access to technology must be considered in development of interventions in this regard. Traditionally, this field has not seen equal rates of access by men and women. Without targeted interventions to train girls and women to access jobs in these fields the disparities in access will worsen. The current digital divide will also have implications for long term access and participation of women and girls as girls need the foundation, otherwise they will be at a disadvantage. The cost of new technologies may also be a limiting factor to uptake by women due to the current wage gap (up to 25% in some countries) that means that men earn higher incomes.

Girls and climate action

Girls are the face of climate activism in the Caribbean and Latin America. They carry an unfair burden and face heightened risk of victimization, politic ostracization and burn out. There are very few resources to support girls who are working on the climate crisis and traditionally regional governments do not provide platforms for girls to participate in global dialogues. As such youth climate activism appears to be the domain of young women from the Global North. Young women from the Global South want to tell their own stories, make their own demands and put forward their own solutions to regional and world leaders. I encourage regional governments to provide resources for girls and young women to join national delegations and participate in global events such as the COP. This provides an opportunity for training and mentorship and affirms the country's commitment to inclusive climate planning. I also encourage that legislations related to cyber activity consider the heightened exposure of young girls and women using these platforms for activism.

Young women and girls in climate policy

While many countries across the LAC have integrated 'gender' in recent climate policies, in many cases it the framing remains narrow and some might describe the reference as tokenistic. We have seen s

shift from the victim narrative previously adopted and greater acknowledgement of the agency and institution of women and girls. However, rarely are the recommendations premised on through analysis of the capacities and vulnerabilities of man and women or duly consider the risks posed to young women and girls. Climate policies, programmes and plans in the region must seek to not merely 'mention' gender or women, instead must seek to be gender transformative. They must engage young women and girls fully in the development process and. Policies must be founded on credible assessments of local realities. Only then can they be truly responsive to the actual circumstances of the country or community. Where data is lacking, funding must be allocated for studies to be done to provide accurate data. Resources must be allocated for activities that target women and girls in the implementation of the policy; and include indicators that assess policy effectiveness based on the benefits to young women and girls

Recommendations

- Provision of resources to youth led initiatives in climate change including funding
- Include participation of youth representatives in official delegations
- Improved equity in access to ICT and other digital resources by youth
- Harness youth innovation and creativity to develop indigenous and technological solutions to the climate crisis
- Assess and integrate challenges to young women and girls as a priority in all areas of planning

The way forward

Leadership in the LAC must adopt an intersectional, inclusive and integrated approach to climate action. An approach that considers the differential vulnerabilities and capacities of young women and girls and prioritizes their needs as a prerequisite for sustainable development. Policy interventions must be transformative and progressive. Leadership must become transformational, corruption free and must engender trust. Leaders must think 'as if their heads have descended into their hearts' and the empowerment of young women and girls to build resilience to the climate crisis must be seem as an imperative to secure the collective future of our people. The emerging challenges that will further shape young women's realities and determine their ability to respond to climate change are multi-faceted and very often can only be best understood from a youth perspective. Ultimately youth leadership that is also gender aware and grounded in climate justice must be included given space to help make decisions about the future of the region.