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Zonta Says NOW to gender-equal climate action

1. Introduction

*The climate crisis is a human rights crisis – and a women’s rights crisis*¹.

UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, at CSW66, 2022.

How are the climate crisis and gender equality linked? As greenhouse gas emissions increase, they warm the atmosphere and trigger extreme weather events such as heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, ice loss, sea level rises, floods, and storms². These events cause social disruption and magnify existing inequalities—people lose their homes and jobs, the poor get poorer, there is more stress and violence—and **gender inequality accelerates**. We can break this chain of events by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and closing the gender gaps in education, economic opportunity, and decision-making.

Zonta Says NOW to gender equal-climate action encourages Zontians to

- learn about the climate crisis to understand how increased greenhouse gas emissions ultimately lead to increased gender inequality
- advocate for the rights of women and girls in a future where gender equality is threatened by extreme weather events, sea level rise, changes in agricultural patterns and global insecurity and
- take on leadership positions in our communities, workplaces and parliaments so that women are equally represented around decision-making tables.

We are living in a decisive decade for humanity. United Nations scientists have shown that we must limit global temperature rises to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to preserve a liveable planet—and we have already reached 1.1°C. The UN recommends reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 45 per cent by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050.³

As Zonta Says NOW champions, we will actively reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and stand up for the rights of women and girls in this decisive decade for humanity.

2. The Problems

- Human activity has altered almost 75 per cent of the earth’s surface⁴, and around 1 million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction.⁵
- Global climate change impacts, such as intense heat, drought, bushfires, floods, and storms, displaced 30 million people in 2020⁶ and, without increased action on climate change, could displace around a billion people by 2050⁷.
- Climate change acts as a threat multiplier catalysing water and food scarcity, pandemics, and displacement⁸.
- Women are more likely than men to live in extreme poverty⁹.
- Nearly 60 per cent of people who are severely hungry are women and girls. Severe hunger can lead to iron deficiency and organ damage if left untreated.¹⁰

- Women and girls are more likely to be injured and killed in extreme weather events¹¹.
- In some places, girls may not be allowed to swim or climb trees, making it difficult for them to escape from floodwaters. The restrictive nature of some traditional clothing worn by women and girls can make it more difficult for them to move quickly from dangerous situations. Also, women and girls may not be permitted to leave their houses without a male family member, impeding their ability to escape or seek help in a disaster¹².
- About 218 million women in lower and middle-income countries have an unmet need for modern contraception, and it is estimated that nearly half of their pregnancies (111 million annually) are unintended¹³.
- Like all war-, conflict- and crisis-related existential emergencies and threats, the catastrophic effects of climate change have been shown to lead to an increase in forced and child marriages¹⁴, an increase in forced prostitution¹⁵, and other forms of sexualized violence - not least in connection with modern slavery¹⁶.
- Globally, the average gender pay gap is around 20 per cent¹⁷, and in the OECD, women aged 65 and older receive 26 per cent less income than men from the pension system¹⁸.
- During the COVID pandemic, women suffered disproportionate job and income losses¹⁹, and violence against women increased²⁰.
- Women are more likely than men to be illiterate²¹, and are less likely to use the internet²². Women are less likely than men to access digital warning systems and emergency assistance, access digital devices, access digital education and training, and access digital networks and electricity. This digital gender divide means that women can miss out on educational opportunities, information on essential services and access to healthcare²³.
- Climate change is likely to exacerbate sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls²⁴.
- Globally, one-quarter of parliamentarians are women²⁵, and fewer than 30 per cent of climate negotiators are women²⁶, making it difficult to hear women's voices on the world stage.
- Women are largely excluded from shaping disaster risk reduction policies and plans²⁷.

3. The Solutions

- Girls with 12 years of education have more life choices, can build more resilient communities, and have fewer children than girls with no education²⁸. Increased knowledge about, access to, and quality of voluntary family planning, and 12 years of high-quality education, are essential to achieving the UN's 2019 medium global population projection of 9.7 billion people by 2050²⁹.
- Globally, women have around three-quarters of the legal rights of men³⁰. Increasing their legal rights will enable women to legally access credit, sign a contract, register a business, and open a bank account—making it easier to obtain and improve land or start businesses to support their families.
- Ending violence against women will enable more women to participate at their full potential³¹.
- Science, technology and innovation are central to reaching the targets of the Paris Agreement, yet globally, women made up less than a third of the world's science researchers³². Advocating for more women and girls to study science, technology, engineering and mathematic subjects (STEM) will ensure more diverse thought and gendered climate solutions.
- Countries with more women in their parliaments adopt more stringent climate policies³³.
- Inspiring more women into leadership positions in their communities, workplaces, councils, and parliaments and wherever they can be involved in planning and policy-making is crucial to tackling climate change effectively³⁴.

4. What can WE do?

1. Get the facts

- We can increase our awareness of climate change and its gender-related consequences by

- reading books, watching videos, reading articles and listening to podcasts from reputable sources, e.g. United Nations agencies³⁵, TED Countdown³⁶, NASA³⁷, David Attenborough documentaries³⁸, Jane Goodall Hopecasts³⁹, Outrage and Optimism podcasts⁴⁰
- learning more about the Sustainable Development Goals⁴¹ and what is happening in our state, region and community.

2. Lead by example

- Reduce our emissions with ten simple actions⁴² and set our own sustainability challenges e.g. eating and purchasing more sustainably, walking and using public transport more often and supporting environmentally sustainable businesses with our purchases and investments.

3. Add our voice

- Raise awareness locally about climate change and its gender-related consequences by
 - Developing climate/gender equality elevator speeches or lists of key facts as conversation starters with family, co-workers and friends⁴³. Practice saying them.
 - Joining and hosting local events/marches to raise awareness.
 - Talking with local organizations and elected officials to raise awareness and discuss solutions.

4. Advocate

- Contact community representatives, local politicians, local governments, and local NGOs to learn about local sustainability initiatives and whether the needs of women have been considered (or not) in the development of climate change response and disaster management plans.
- Demand and support the equal involvement of women and men in national and local decisions regarding environmental sustainability and disaster risk management.
- Demand and promote girls' education and the inclusion of climate literacy in schools, as well as the education of girls and women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) to increase the scientific and technical contribution of women to climate protection.
- Advocate for national climate policies that take into account women's economic opportunities and ensure their full and equal economic participation.

5. Collaborate

- Work with Zonta clubs to magnify our voice, educate on climate change, and raise awareness of local issues to achieve gender-equal climate justice.
- Work smarter, not harder, by collaborating with like-minded organisations, for example, UN Women⁴⁴, 1 Million Women⁴⁵, and Plastic Free July⁴⁶. Find out who is working for gender-equal climate justice in your area.

Many Zontians around the world have already started to take action. Check out the websites at District 23 Zonta Says NOW, the USA Caucus, District 12 and District 8 for ideas.

Through our gender-equal climate action, we can build a better world for everyone.

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