GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL COMMONS

These briefs are intended for organizations and activists engaged in advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender and sexuality in Asia and the Pacific. They aim to provide a snapshot how SRHR links to the new Agenda 2030 framework laid out by the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report and the six entry-points it identifies, provide brief evidence from the context of Asia Pacific, and illustrate how fulfillment of SRHR helps countries in the region achieve just and sustainable development using the development justice framework of Asia Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (AP RCEM). The briefs have been developed by members of the Thematic Working Group on Gender, Sexuality and SRHR of the AP RCEM, and supported by the co-coordinator of the TWG, APA.

INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN GENDER SRHR AND ENTRYPONT 6

Securing the global environmental commons (GECs) is about respecting planetary boundaries, preserving shared resources and global ecological systems, and ensuring human survival on earth. Asia Pacific countries have committed to environment-related goals of Agenda 2030 (including SDGs 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15), however there is little integration of SDGs 5, 8, 10 and 17 and climate change is threatening to undo recent gains across SDGs 1-16. The 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report finds little country-level data for almost 60% of environmental indicators in the region. Uneven or regressive trends are variably seen across the region with widening target gaps on GECs.

The Asia Pacific is extremely vulnerable to climate change related disasters with a high percentage of its population exposed to unhealthy levels of air and water pollution. The vulnerabilities of women, children, persons with disabilities, elderly, marginalized and remotely located, coastal or indigenous communities as a result of disaster and disease outbreak, climatic events, conflict, and rapidly changing population demographics, are well documented. Rural and indigenous women’s food insecurity is linked directly with degradation of traditional lands they rely on for food, fuel, livelihood, shelter, and traditional medicine, as well as displacement of indigenous knowledge.

Climate change worsens the cycle of poverty and vulnerability for women and girls and they are more likely to die during natural disasters. Climate change also exacerbates the risk of gender based violence against women, especially women living in poverty and/or marginalized based on race, ethnicity, sexuality and others.

Women’s roles as primary caregivers and providers of food and fuel make them more vulnerable when flooding and droughts occur due to climate change. As the financial resources of families dwindle, adolescent girls are forced to marry at younger ages, contributing directly to school drop-out, early pregnancies, maternal morbidity and mortality, and a life of domestic servitude. While displaced, trading sex for money or precious resources may be the only way some women are able to support themselves and their families. During earthquakes and tsunamis, women and girls are more likely to be at home in poorly constructed houses, while men are working in open spaces or in stronger buildings such as offices. Women are also less likely to learn to swim or climb trees, or to receive disaster early warning information.

For islanders and coastal communities, changes in the ocean due to shifting weather patterns, extreme ocean and weather events, oceanic pollution due to maritime transportation and debris, and rising ocean temperatures impacts directly on fisheries and the livelihoods of those who depend on oceans. Women in parts of India and Bangladesh have faced health consequences and seen their economic prospects diminish as rivers have become saltier. And in Fiji, a rapid rise in sea levels and resulting saltwater intrusion and coastal floods have already made portions of the island nation uninhabitable, with global sea level changes are expected to double by the end of the century.

Highly hazardous pesticides continue to be used in developing countries, and exposure to pesticides has been associated with menstrual cycle disturbances, reduced fertility, prolonged time-to-pregnancy, spontaneous abortion, stillbirths and developmental defects. And recent WECF report notes that indigenous womens’ exposure to environmental health hazards severely effects their sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

POLICY COHERENCE

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conferences have developed a gender action plan (GAP) that sets targets for participation of women in climate policy decision-making as well as allocations of funds and means for climate action. The 2015 Paris Agreement made specific provision for empowerment of women, recognising they
are disproportionately impacted by climate change, and is supported by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 and the New Urban Agenda, 2016. The Ministerial Declaration of the 4th UN Environment Assembly further commits world leaders to ‘promote innovation and knowledge sharing in chemicals and waste management to achieve safer and less toxic material flows in order to protect human health and the environment’ and ‘awareness-raising in the framework of sustainable development, with a strong focus on women and youth’. The Beijing Platform for Action provides detailed analysis of women and girls in armed conflict, recommending protection, assistance and training to refugee and other displaced women. The UN High-level Declaration for Migrants and Refugees, 2016, also calls for mainstreaming a gender perspective, reducing stigma, discrimination and violence, ensuring access of SRH services for affectees and addressing the specific healthcare needs of migrant and mobile populations, refugees and crisis-affected populations’.

The Midterm Review of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development 2019 underscored the need for more responsive policies and interventions to respond to shifts in population dynamics in the region, noting the importance of building resilience to climate change, addressing the effects of the degradation of the environment and resource management on women and girls, specifically their SRH. Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum promote strong regionalism to protect communities affected by climate change, disasters and conflict-driven displacement. The 2017 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Declaration on Climate Change Action recognizes climate change’s disproportionate impact on vulnerable and marginalized groups, their contribution to the effective implementation of Paris outcomes, and acknowledges the role of women as pivotal to climate change solutions.

EVIDENCE FROM ASIA PACIFIC

− 13 of the 30 countries most vulnerable to climate change are in Asia Pacific and 70% of the world’s natural disasters affecting more than 1.6 billion people in recent years. As majority poor, women are disproportionately affected by climate change.
− Approximately 4 million people in the region die every year due to air pollution. Around 80% of the region’s rivers are polluted and almost 1.8 million die each year from water-related diseases.
− Overfishing and ocean acidification are threatening the livelihoods of 60 million fishers especially in the Pacific.
− Government expenditure on fossil fuel subsidies exceeds public spending on education or health in many Asian countries, while fossil fuels are subsidized to the tune of $5 trillion a year.
− Plastic litter costs $1.3 billion a year in the tourism, fishing and shipping industries.
− Climate crisis is associated with an increase in asthma in adolescent girls; and higher risk of acquiring lung cancer and heart disease in mid-life as well as heart attacks, strokes, and dementia in older women.
− Air pollution impacts reproductive health, and in particular has adverse effects on - fertility, pregnancy outcomes and fetal health.
− Degradation of nature can lead to increased vulnerability to gender-based violence including sexual assault, domestic violence and forced prostitution.

CONCLUSIONS

The management of GECs requires cooperation amongst countries. SDGs 3 and 5 need to be integrated in all GEC commitments with women and vulnerable communities taking center-stage to lead efforts for environmental preservation, preventing biodiversity loss and transition to clean energy.

Women’s access to information, services, culturally appropriate and gender responsive adaptation strategies must be ensured. Rural and indigenous women’s needs and participation must be prioritized in national climate programs and in climate funding to achieve the Paris Agreement. Governments must also divest from extractive and fossil fuel sectors and invest in sustainable local sectors that commit to gender equality, set and fulfil targets for women’s participation and leadership in sustainable energy and climate policy decision-making and climate actions, and protect environmental and climate defenders, who are increasingly threatened and shut down from participating in climate talks and negotiations.

Disaggregated disaster data is still needed for most countries. Gaps also remain on effective implementation of systems for addressing gender-based violence during natural disasters, humanitarian/relief settings.
6 Carney et al, (2020) *Gender-based violence and environment linkages.* IUCN.
7 Ibid.
9 UN ESCAP (2017) *Disaster Resilience for Sustainable Development Asia Pacific Disaster Report 2017*
10 Thomson Reuters Foundation (2018). *Women in India Face Health Problems and Other Risks as the Rivers Grow Saltier.*
11 Fiji National Climate Change Policy 2018-2030
14 Para 5c.
15 Para 5o.
16 Para 31.
18 See also: *Framework for Pacific Regionalism* (2014),
19 Paras 11 l and 11 m.
25 Multilateral environmental agreements (i.e., the *Convention on Biodiversity*, the UNFCCC, the *Convention to Combating Desertification*), various UN Environment Assembly resolutions support regional mechanisms on environment (such as the *Regional Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia- Pacific*, the *SAMOA Pathway*, the *AP Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction*, *AP Ministerial Forum on Environment and Health*) and various sub-regional agreements between governments.