



WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND CLIMATE CHANGE



By Loreto Brossard



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"When it comes to climate change, people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by its impacts, and one of the main reasons for this is that the majority of people with disabilities live in poverty," stated the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nada Al-Nasif.

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Introduction

People with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by climate change.

A United Nations Human Rights report concluded that poverty, stigma, and discrimination are the three main factors exposing people with disabilities to the effects of climate change¹.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time, impacting communities and ecosystems worldwide. However, not all people experience its effects in the same way. Women with disabilities, in particular, face unique and disproportionate vulnerability to environmental and climatic impacts. This book explores the multiple dimensions of this vulnerability, examining how the intersections of gender and disability amplify the risks and challenges these women face in a world increasingly affected by climate change.

From limited access to essential resources and healthcare services to physical and social barriers that hinder their mobility and participation in decision-making, women with disabilities find themselves at a critical crossroads. Their resilience is constantly tested by recurring disasters, extreme weather conditions, and the slow but inexorable transformation of their environments. Despite their strength and adaptability, the lack of inclusive and accessible policies exacerbates their situation, leaving them with fewer opportunities to adapt and recover.

The lack of economic resources is another factor that exacerbates the vulnerability of women with disabilities to climate change. They often have fewer employment opportunities and, consequently, lower incomes, limiting their ability to prepare for and respond effectively to disasters. The inability to access preventive measures, such as reinforcing their homes or purchasing emergency supplies, can have devastating consequences. Therefore, it is crucial to implement policies that promote economic inclusion and access to financial resources for these women, ensuring they can strengthen their resilience to climate impacts.

Moreover, the limited participation of women with disabilities in decision-making and climate policy formulation perpetuates their marginalization. It is vital that their voices are heard and their experiences valued in the creation of mitigation and adaptation strategies. This will not only ensure that their specific needs are addressed but also enrich solutions with diverse and inclusive perspectives. By actively fostering the inclusion of women with disabilities at all levels of policy planning and implementation, we can move towards a more just and equitable future, where everyone has the opportunity to adapt and thrive in the face of climate change.

¹ People with Disabilities Disproportionately Affected by Climate Change, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2020

This book not only documents the adversities they face but also highlights the urgency of integrating their voices and needs into climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. As readers go through these pages, we hope they gain a deeper and more empathetic understanding of the experiences of women with disabilities in the context of climate change. Furthermore, we aim to inspire policymakers, activists, and communities to take concrete actions to ensure that no one is left behind in our global fight against this threat. Only through an inclusive and equitable approach can we build truly effective and sustainable resilience against climate change.

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read "Loreto Brossard".

Loreto Brossard

Deputy Director ONG Inclusiva

Climate Action and the Dignity of Women with Disabilities

Every climate action taken should promote the dignity of people with disabilities, rather than reinforce existing social injustices, stated Sébastien Jodoin, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law at McGill University. For example, the development of public transportation systems is key to reducing carbon dioxide emissions from cars in many parts of the world. However, he noted that many of these systems are inaccessible to people with physical mobility impairments or visual disabilities. Ensuring accessible public transportation would benefit a larger number of users. "A disability rights-based approach, by empowering people with disabilities and meaningfully including their human rights, ideas, and perspectives, can generate solutions to climate issues and reach a broader portion of the population," Jodoin affirmed².

Very little is known about how and why people with disabilities are affected by different climate impacts, the contextual factors that shape their exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, and the solutions needed to ensure their resilience³.

Climate action must go beyond mitigation and adaptation; it should be a platform to uphold the dignity and rights of women with disabilities. These women face a dual burden of discrimination and vulnerability, and any effective climate strategy must recognize and address this reality. Dignity means not only survival but also the ability to live a full and autonomous life, something that is constantly threatened by the impacts of climate change.

Integrating dignity into climate action means ensuring that women with disabilities have access to all the necessary resources to face climate disasters. This includes accessibility in emergency shelters, information in adapted formats, and mental and physical health services that consider their specific needs. Furthermore, it is crucial that these women actively participate in climate-related decision-making. Their voices must be heard and valued, not only as beneficiaries of policies but as agents of change and leaders in their communities.

Promoting dignity also requires an inclusive and equitable approach to resource distribution. Investments in resilient and accessible infrastructure, training programs, and economic opportunities must be designed with the additional barriers faced by women with disabilities in mind. By ensuring that these women not only survive but also thrive in a world affected by climate change, we are building a more just and resilient society for everyone. Inclusive climate action is not just a matter of social justice; it is a necessity for achieving a sustainable future.

² Nothing about us without us: the urgent need for disability-inclusive climate research, McGill 2023

³ People with Disabilities Disproportionately Affected by Climate Change United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2020

Challenges Faced by Women with Disabilities Due to Climate Change

The intersection of gender, disability, and climate change highlights the need for inclusive and specific policies that address these multiple layers of vulnerability. It is crucial that climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies include the perspectives of women with disabilities to ensure they are not left behind.

Women with disabilities are disproportionately affected by climate change due to a combination of social, economic, and health factors that amplify their vulnerability in disaster situations and environmental changes. Here are some key reasons:

1. Limited Access to Resources and Services:

- **Health and Healthcare:** Women with disabilities often have more limited access to healthcare services, complicating their response to climate-related health emergencies such as heatwaves, waterborne, and airborne diseases.
- **Economic Resources:** Generally, women with disabilities have fewer economic opportunities, leaving them with fewer resources to adapt to and recover from climate impacts.

2. Physical and Infrastructure Barriers:

- **Mobility and Accessibility:** Women with disabilities may face greater difficulties evacuating during disasters due to a lack of accessible infrastructure and adequate transportation.
- **Inadequate Housing:** They often live in housing that is not prepared to withstand extreme events such as floods, storms, or earthquakes.

3. Social Exclusion and Discrimination:

- **Limited Participation in Decision-Making:** Women with disabilities are often not included in the planning and implementation of climate adaptation policies and programs, meaning their needs and perspectives are not considered.
- **Stigmatization and Marginalization:** They may face additional discrimination that places them at an even greater disadvantage in emergency situations.

4. Increased Dependence:

- **Need for Support:** Many women with disabilities depend on caregivers or support systems that may be disrupted during climate disasters, leaving them in situations of extreme vulnerability.
- **Access to Information:** Information about emergencies and climate adaptation may not be accessible to all people with disabilities, especially if there are communication barriers.

5. Impacts on Mental and Emotional Health:

- **Stress and Anxiety:** Constant exposure to extreme weather events can increase stress and anxiety levels, and women with disabilities may have less access to mental health resources to cope with these challenges.

Impact on the Mental Health of Women with Disabilities Caused by Climate Change

Constant exposure to extreme climate events such as heatwaves, floods, hurricanes, and droughts can have profound effects on the mental and emotional health of individuals. For women with disabilities, these effects may be even more pronounced due to various reasons:

Direct Impacts of Stress and Anxiety

1. Repeated Traumatic Events:

- **Experience of Disasters:** The recurrence of extreme climate events can create a cycle of repeated trauma, exacerbating pre-existing conditions of stress and anxiety.
- **Loss of Resources:** The destruction of homes, loss of belongings, and interruption of essential services can intensify feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.

2. Increased Responsibilities:

- **Personal and Family Care:** Women with disabilities who also care for other family members may feel overwhelmed by the dual burden of caring for themselves and others in emergency situations.

3. Disruption of Routines and Support Networks:

- **Displacement and Evacuation:** The need to evacuate or relocate can disrupt daily routines and separate women with disabilities from their support networks, which are crucial for their emotional well-being.
- **Access to Support Services:** The interruption of medical and support services can increase anxiety related to the lack of necessary care and resources for daily needs.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Resources

1. Infrastructure and Accessibility:

- **Mental Health Centers:** Many facilities are not designed to be accessible for people with physical disabilities, limiting their ability to receive treatment.
- **Transportation:** Difficulties in accessing adequate transportation can prevent women with disabilities from reaching mental health services.

2. Information and Communication:

- **Accessibility of Information:** Information on how to access mental health services during and after a disaster may not be available in accessible formats such as Braille, sign language, or easy-to-read text.
- **Assistive Technology:** Lack of access to appropriate assistive technology can hinder communication with mental health providers.

3. Stigmatization and Discrimination:

- **Social Stigma:** Women with disabilities may face double stigmatization due to their disability and for seeking help for mental health issues.
- **Discrimination in Services:** They may experience discrimination in mental health services, which can discourage them from seeking the help they need.

Long-term Consequences

1. Deterioration of Mental Health:

- **Chronic Conditions:** Chronic stress and anxiety can lead to the development or worsening of mental health conditions such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental illnesses.
- **Impact on Quality of Life:** Deteriorated mental health can affect the ability of women with disabilities to engage in daily activities, maintain social relationships, and lead productive lives.

2. Social Isolation:

- **Withdrawal:** Stress and anxiety can lead to increased social isolation, reducing opportunities for emotional and social support, which in turn can worsen their mental health.
- **Disconnection from the Community:** Disconnection from community support networks can make recovery and adaptation to new post-disaster conditions more challenging.

Inclusive Solutions Proposals

1. **Inclusive Policies:**
 - **Meaningful Participation of Women with Disabilities:** Women with disabilities should be heard and involved in the development of policies related to climate change.
 - **Inclusive Emergency Plans:** Emergency plans should include specific considerations for women with disabilities, ensuring their access to shelters, resources, and support during and after disasters.
 - **Mental Health Programs:** It is crucial to develop accessible mental health programs that consider the specific needs of women with disabilities.
 - **Employment and Entrepreneurship Programs:** Women with disabilities need permanent income sources; these programs will help reduce adverse effects.
2. **Strengthening Support Networks:**
 - **Community Support:** Encouraging community support networks that include women with disabilities can provide crucial emotional and practical support.
 - **Training Professionals:** Training mental health professionals to provide accessible and non-discriminatory services for women with disabilities.
3. **Education and Public Awareness:**
 - **Awareness Campaigns:** Launch awareness campaigns aimed at the general public about the needs and rights of women with disabilities in the context of climate change.
 - **Inclusive Education:** Incorporate topics on climate change and disability in school curricula to educate future generations on the importance of inclusion and resilience.
4. **Accessibility to Information:**
 - **Adapted Information:** Ensure that all information related to climate change and emergency plans is available in accessible formats, including Braille, sign language, and easy-to-read text.
 - **Inclusive Digital Platforms:** Develop and promote accessible digital platforms where women with disabilities can access resources, information, and support in real time.
5. **Resilient and Accessible Infrastructure:**
 - **Inclusive Construction:** Promote the construction and adaptation of public and private infrastructure that is accessible and disaster-resilient, ensuring that women with disabilities can move and take shelter safely.
 - **Accessible Transportation:** Implement and improve accessible public transportation systems to facilitate the safe evacuation and movement of people with disabilities during climate emergencies.
6. **Participation in Research and Development:**
 - **Inclusive Research:** Involve women with disabilities in climate change research projects to ensure their experiences and needs are considered in developing new solutions.
 - **Assistive Technologies:** Encourage the development and implementation of assistive technologies that help women with disabilities adapt to and respond to the impacts of climate change.

7. Access to Financial Resources:

- **Emergency Funds:** Create specific emergency funds for women with disabilities, ensuring quick and effective access to financial resources in disaster situations.
- **Inclusive Microcredit:** Establish microcredit programs that provide women with disabilities the means to start businesses and economically adapt to the challenges of climate change.

8. Promotion of Gender Equality:

- **Empowerment of Women:** Implement programs that empower women with disabilities, promoting gender equality and removing barriers to their full participation in society.
- **Reduction of Discrimination:** Develop policies and programs that address and reduce gender and disability discrimination, creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

By addressing these challenges comprehensively, the ability of women with disabilities to cope with and recover from the impacts of climate change on their mental and emotional health can be significantly improved. These proposals are essential because they address the multidimensional barriers that women with disabilities face in the context of climate change. Including women with disabilities in policy-making ensures that their specific needs are considered, which is crucial for their protection and resilience. Inclusive policies and adapted emergency plans not only save lives but also promote equity and social justice. Mental health and employment programs are vital for providing holistic support, helping them overcome stress, anxiety, and the economic challenges exacerbated by climate change.

Furthermore, access to information, inclusive education, and resilient infrastructure are fundamental to empowering women with disabilities and enabling their active and safe participation in society. Research and the development of assistive technologies ensure that their experiences and knowledge contribute to effective and sustainable solutions. The creation of emergency funds and microcredit programs provides a crucial financial cushion in times of crisis, while the promotion of gender equality combats systemic discrimination, fostering a more inclusive and just environment. These measures not only address immediate challenges but also promote a more resilient and equitable society in the long term.

Conclusions

Climate change poses a multifaceted threat that disproportionately affects women with disabilities. By exploring the economic, social, and health barriers that amplify their vulnerability, this book highlights the urgency of implementing inclusive and accessible policies. It is crucial to recognize that climate action must go beyond mitigation and adaptation, integrating principles of dignity and human rights to ensure that the needs and voices of these women are heard and valued.

Sustainable and equitable solutions will only be possible if we adopt a holistic approach that includes the perspective of women with disabilities at all stages of climate policy planning and implementation. Building effective and sustainable resilience requires a global commitment to ensure that no one is left behind. By empowering these women and promoting their active participation, we can move towards a more just and equitable future, where all individuals have the opportunity to adapt to and thrive in the face of climate challenges.

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