

Women hold the key to curbing climate change

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(CNN) In 1911, over one million people took to the streets of Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland for [equal rights and suffrage](#). It was the first [International Women's Day](#) -- a day the world continues to celebrate more than a century later. Those inaugural participants had little reason to include heat-trapping emissions or global warming in their concerns, although American scientist Eunice Newton Foote had defined the greenhouse effect decades prior, in 1856. ([A first for which](#) more credit is due.)

Ice core research shows that Earth's atmosphere had just over [300 parts per million](#) of carbon dioxide in 1911. In 2019, we hover [around 410 parts per million](#). Those numbers can seem abstract, but they are deeply consequential.

At 410 parts per million and rising today, we face a rapidly warming world, with emissions at an [all-time high](#). These are planetary conditions unknown to any human beings before us -- and uncharted territory for our survival. Since 1911, we have entered a new geologic age, The Anthropocene, so called because human activity [is now the dominant influence shaping the planet](#). Our warming world is the defining backdrop for [International Women's Day](#) in 2019.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day -- [#BalanceforBetter](#) -- calls for improved gender parity to improve the world. That aspiration is entangled with climate

change in two elemental ways. First, while the negative effects of climate change touch everyone, research shows they [hit women and girls hardest](#). Simultaneously, and surprisingly, advancing key areas of gender equity can help curb the emissions causing the problem. These dual dynamics forge [an inextricable link](#) between climate change and the possibility of a more gender-balanced society.

Women and girls face disproportionate harm from climate change because [it is a powerful "threat multiplier,"](#) making already tenuous situations or existing vulnerabilities worse. We have seen that play out in places from [New Orleans after Katrina](#) to [Nairobi](#).

Especially under conditions of poverty, women and girls face [greater risk](#) of displacement or death from natural disasters. Droughts and floods have been tied to [early marriage](#) and [sexual exploitation](#) -- sometimes last-resort survival strategies. Tasks such as collecting water and fuel or growing food fall on female shoulders -- [sometimes literally](#) -- in many cultures. Already challenging and time-consuming activities, climate change can deepen the burden, and with it, struggles for health, education, and financial security.

In very real ways, climate change thwarts the rights and opportunities of women and girls. These realities make gender-responsive strategies for climate resilience and adaptation critical. They make centering the rights, voices, and leadership of women and girls a necessity.

Turns out, gender is equally important for solutions to stem climate change. [Research from](#) Project Drawdown shows that securing the rights of women and girls can have a positive impact on the atmosphere, comparable to wind turbines, solar panels, or forests. Why? In large part because gender equity has ripple effects on growth of our human family. When girls and women have access to high-quality education and reproductive health care, they have more agency and make different choices for their lives. Those choices often include marrying later and having fewer children. The decisions individual women and their partners make add up. Across the world and over time, they influence how many human beings live on this planet and eat, move, build, produce, consume, and waste -- all of which generates emissions.

To be sure, those emissions are not generated equally. The affluent produce far more than the poor. The average American produces [almost 17 tons of carbon dioxide](#) per capita each year compared to the 1.7 tons or just one-tenth of a ton of someone in India or Madagascar, respectively. Anyone who says curbing population is a silver bullet is ignoring critical variables of production and consumption. We must see the whole ecosystem, not just the trees.

Both [education](#) and [family planning](#) are basic human rights, not yet reality for too many people. Around the world, [130 million](#) school-age girls are not in the classroom. They are missing a vital foundation for life, and that fundamental right must be secured. The same is true for access to high-quality, voluntary reproductive health care. Some [45% of pregnancies](#) in the United States are unintended, while [214 million women](#) in lower-income countries say they want to prevent pregnancy but have "unmet need" for contraception. Policy changes made by the Trump administration are set to worsen both of those statistics, with ripple effects for the planet.

Of course, girls' and women's leadership on climate also goes way beyond family choices. Many of the vital voices and agents of change for a liveable planet are female. Women and girls are overcoming unequal representation at decision-making tables and [underinvestment](#) in their efforts. One need look no further than the example of 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the growing community of teenage girls leading school strikes for climate around the world. "The climate crisis has already been solved," [Thunberg has said](#). "We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is to wake up and change. ... So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come."

I imagine today's school strikers would find kindred spirits among the participants in International Women's Day 1911. They are certainly building on the legacy of raising voices and asserting rights. More importantly, they need courageous comrades today. We are reckoning with a planetary challenge of unprecedented scale and severity. The world must mobilize climate solutions as quickly and fully as possible, remembering that gender equity is itself one. Perhaps the silver lining of The Anthropocene is that if human forces can put our planet in the balance, we can also regain equilibrium. It is our choice. That may be the truest, most crucial meaning of [#BalanceforBetter](#).