

Tackling gender inequality is crucial for climate adaptation

Coronavirus – and its many lockdowns – has led to women around the world doing more domestic chores and family care; employment and education opportunities for women are being lost.

Similarly, the impacts of climate change – such as floods, heatwaves or wildfires – disproportionately hit women's livelihoods.

But, as Dr Tamsin Edwards, a climate scientist at King's College London and co-presenter of the BBC's 39 ways to save the planet, has said:

The story to tell here is not just the suffering of women. We have an unprecedented chance to design a better future. We know that policies that reduce climate change or its impacts can reduce gender inequality, and vice versa, as long as they are truly designed in consultation with women.

In over 25 years working in financial services in the UK, I've seen individuals and business respond to changes in society at different speeds.

Gender diversity leads to better outcomes.

For instance, oil companies with higher female representation at board level are more likely to have set decarbonisation strategies.

This doesn't mean having more women leads to lower emissions, but it does point to a positive correlation between gender diversity and improving climate governance.

Over a decade ago I helped set up the 30% Club and its investor group to increase the number of women in the boardroom.

While we celebrate success in this, with a dramatic jump in the UK in the last five years, women's progress to top executive roles is still fragile and slow.

Melinda Gates and David Malpass recently wrote:

When the 2008 recession hit, few asked how stimulus measures would affect women compared with men. That approach won't work for the COVID-19 crisis. As leaders face the enormous challenge of rebuilding post-pandemic economies, women must be at the centre of their strategies.

At the Environment Agency I am keen that we walk the walk ourselves.

Through our flood work and regulation we help make the country more resilient to climate shocks.

In January, I was in Greater Manchester as part of the response to Storm Christoph where our defences stopped tens of thousands of people from being flooded out of their homes.

Ten of our fifteen area directors across the country are women and so are two of our five executive directors. They lead this response on the ground.

Our Board has five men and seven women.

Among other things, we review our pay gap for disability, race, religion and belief, sexual orientation (protected characteristics) as well as gender.

I'm not pretending we've got diversity sorted, we're a long way from it, but more inclusive decision making that is representative of communities we work in, leads to better outcomes for the environment and communities.

People with relevant experiences need to be included in decision-making, this makes for better policy.

So we must amplify the voices of women who work on the climate change and nature recovery agendas, not just on International Women's Day but every day.

WaterAid, a charity many colleagues at the Environment Agency support, say access to water, sanitation and hygiene is already gendered and being made worse by climate change.

It is women and girls who are most effected by water scarcity as a result of climate change; but it is women and girls who lead on the solutions, and when climate disaster hits it is women that lead the response, so this year, when the UK hosts COP26 in Glasgow and the Convention on Biological Diversity COP15 takes place in Kunming, China, governments should be discussing greater investment in locally led adaptation.

The climate crisis will bring a multitude of overlapping impacts.

Men and women will need to use all of our expertise and strength to be prosperous and resilient.

Female leadership in international, national and local climate policy-making is vital.

Thank you.