

Women and climate change – Mehreen Faruqi

The theme for this morning “women and climate change’ combines two areas that I am adamant about making a change in – gender inequality and inaction on climate change.

Unfortunately, in both areas we are disappointingly moving backwards in NSW and Australia, and I’d like to highlight some of these issues separately before looking into the interconnection between climate change and women.

I grew up in Pakistan, a country that ranks 135 out of 136 in the global gender gap.

So from an early age I was acutely aware of the inequality and discrimination that exists in law as well as societal norms which actually prevents women from access to education, work opportunities or fully participating in decision-making.

Living in Pakistan, I always imagined prosperous countries like Australia having achieved gender equality in all spheres of life.

So I was surprised when I arrived in Sydney 22 years ago and started my postgraduate studies in engineering, only to discover there was only one female academic amongst a fifty odd male teachers in the school of civil and environmental engineering at my university.

Of course, judging gender equality is much more sophisticated than just measuring numbers in one particular institution and profession, but it is a good indicator of existing marginalisation.

There is no doubt that much has been achieved through the successive waves of feminism over the last century.

We’ve fought hard and won many battles - the right to vote and to run for parliament, to join the workforce and pursue careers in all professions.

Laws have been enacted that attempt to create equal pay, equal opportunity and protect women from violence.

While these have improved women’s rights and opportunities, change has been very slow, and inequality and discrimination still pervade many parts of our laws, workplaces and society.

Getting the right to run for Parliament has not yet led to equal representation.

I sit in NSW Parliament where only a quarter of the MPs are women.

Our Parliaments are also not representative of the amazing diversity in our community.

Even though more women complete university degrees than men, they are less likely to reach higher management positions.

The gender pay gap, shamefully, still stands at 17.5%.

Women continue to be over-represented in the casual workforce in NSW, lacking the vital workplace protections and benefits given to full-time workers.

Not only has our journey of equality been slow but even more disappointing is the fact that we are moving backwards and unwinding some of these hard-fought rights.

Domestic violence in NSW has increased by 2% in the last year, yet we see that feminist women-only refuges are losing their funding and being closed down

The gender pay gap has actually increased by 2.6% since 2004.

Concerningly, women are substantially over-represented in the bottom tenth of income earners, a trend which has increased by 5% between 2001 and 2012.

Unfortunately, the lack of women in Federal Cabinet and in the NSW Liberal National Government is sadly indicative of their attitude to the importance of these issues.

Under twenty percent of Coalition MPs are women, and this is even less than the global average of women parliamentarians which is 22 percent.

These areas of inequality, social injustice and the lack of representation in leadership across the corporate and political spectrum have massive implications for why women across the globe are, and will continue to be, disproportionately affected by the risks and threats of climate change.

In the same way that I was surprised about the Australia having a gender gap when I first arrived here, many people and nations across the world find our inaction on climate change difficult to comprehend.

Two years ago, I was lucky enough to visit Brazil to attend the Rio plus 20 Earth Summit.

About 40,000 people from across the world were gathered together to find a way forward on sustainability.

When people found out I was from Australia, they always asked why we were still arguing about whether climate change was happening or not when the rest of the world had moved on and was debating what strategies would work best to mitigate global warming or indeed better prepare us for the consequences.

I have to admit that I really had no explanation other than to admit the wilful ignorance of our decision-makers who do not accept the science and reality and are unwilling to make a change.

And of course developing countries were there with the predicament that they would be hit much harder with sea level rises, extreme heat, changing water conditions and catastrophic weather events, and were looking at us to supporting them in leading the way.

The gendered impacts of climate change are numerous and these are magnified for women living in poorer nations.

We know that with climate change the number and intensity of natural disasters will increase.

We also know that about 70% of the world's poor are women and that gender differences in deaths due to natural disasters correlate with women's social and economic rights.

For example, in Bangladesh following cyclones and flooding in 1991, women had a much higher death rate than men (71 per 1000, vs 15 per 1000, for those aged 20-44).

During the 2004 Asia Tsunami, more than 75% of those who died in Aceh were women.

Women are often not taught survival skills like swimming or climbing, have lower mobility, and cultural constraints that decrease their ability to escape and reduce access to shelter and health care.

Post-disaster, women are usually at higher risk of being placed in unsafe, overcrowded shelters, due to lack such as savings, property or land and are less mobile as primary family care-givers.

Women and girls bear the burden of fetching water for their families and spend significant amounts of time daily hauling water from distant sources.

That water is rarely enough to meet the needs of the household and is often contaminated, so women and girls also pay the heaviest price for poor sanitation.

Women and girls are also responsible for collecting traditional fuels, a physically draining task that can take many hours every day.

With environmental degradation, they are required to search further afield for resources.

As a result of these responsibilities, women have less time to earn money, engage in politics or other public activities, learn to read, acquire other skills, or simply rest.

Girls are sometimes kept home from school, perpetuating the cycle of disempowerment.

As in developing countries, the impacts of climate change will have differing effects on men and women in Australia.

In part, this is because of more women live in poverty than men.

The 2014 Women in NSW report showed there are almost double the number of women as men in the bottom 10% of income earners.

These women will be disproportionately impacted by rising costs of water, foods and fuel.

Following droughts in Victoria, NSW and Queensland, women living rurally faced different challenges to men.

Gender roles changed, resulting in more women seeking off-farm employment, and increased labour contribution.

Women reported feeling more isolated, receiving less support, and having less capacity to travel for health care.

There were also a number of health initiatives focusing on men, but not available for women.

As a result, many women reported being exhausted and without medical or social support networks to draw on.

There will also be a particularly large impact on Indigenous Australians, particularly those living remotely.

They are more likely to suffer during extreme weather conditions, lack health care and lose food and water sources.

So now the big question - what can we do to make sure we act on climate change and that our policies consider gendered impacts and encompass social justice and environmental justice?

It is somewhat ironic that while women are disproportionately affected by climate change, they are also the ones more cognisant of environmental change and more likely to support environmental protection, yet we also face the historical disadvantage of limited access to decision-making.

A Climate Institute poll earlier this year, found that a growing number of Australians want the nation to lead on finding solutions to climate change and 64% of women want Australia to be a leader compared to 58% of men.

The NSW Who Cares About the Environment in 2012? survey suggests that:

- Women (75%) are more likely than men (67%) to be concerned about environmental problems
- On average, women undertake more environmental activities more often than men
- Women decide on 85% of household purchases, so there is inherent power to lead change.

Women are quite uniquely positioned to influence change and be extremely effective and creative agents for managing climate change – but empowerment and equal participation in decision-making is key.

In Bangladesh, women farmers reported that their profitable chickens were drowning because of frequent flooding.

When they were involved in planning for climate change the solution they came up with was to raise ducks instead!

There is a view amongst many environmentalists that perhaps the best hope for change may come from crisis.

I think we all have to fight harder to make sure that this is not the case.

We collectively have the courage and wisdom to learn from our past mistakes and make some important changes and choices before we are left none at all.

We have to take responsibility for closing the gap, both in Australia and across the world.

Women's empowerment and equal participation are a 'whole of society' responsibility.

Barriers that prevent and deter women from participating in politics and decision making have to be removed, whether they be societal such as perceived roles and the inherent discrimination that comes with this or structural such as lack of child care and wage inequality.

Sexism in the workplace and in politics needs to be called out as unacceptable in much louder voices and not just by women, but by society as a whole.

I have seen a rise in activism and peaceful direct action in recent years and that gives me much hope.

I am inspired and energized to see a new wave of feminists and activists, young and old, across politics, class, gender and ethnicity joining together for equality and change.

As a strong feminist and environmental activist I have been standing shoulder to shoulder with them, and together we will turn the tide, as we have in the past.