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Gender, labour and a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹ has noted that “[p]eople who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable to climate change and also to some adaptation and mitigation responses [...] This heightened vulnerability is rarely due to a single cause. Rather, it is the product of intersecting social processes that result in inequalities in socioeconomic status and income, as well as in exposure. Such social processes include, for example, discrimination on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and (dis)ability.” These findings illustrate that the global efforts towards achieving gender equality, on the one hand, and towards effective climate action, on the other hand, are intrinsically linked. While progress on gender equality has undoubtedly been made over recent years in many ways, it is also a fact that women continue to face exclusion, discrimination and disproportionate exposure to socio-economic vulnerabilities. Climate change risks widening existing gender gaps but, at the same time, addressing gender equality as an integral part of climate action can contribute to both achieving gender equality as well as promoting effective mitigation and adaptation measures.

In the world of work, as highlighted by a 2016 ILO report,² several challenges remain in achieving gender equality. Climate change related impacts, as well as actions that exclude women, can serve to enhance these challenges. Women already face significant obstacles in gaining access to decent work, especially as inequality between women and men persists in global labour markets, in respect of opportunities, treatment and outcomes. Gender gaps

regarding dependence on the informal economy with poor working conditions, limited access to social protection, and the disproportionate amount of unpaid household and care work shouldered by women, continue to remain of serious



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concern. The ILO estimates that globally, women earn 77 per cent of what men earn, and at current trends, it will take 70 years to close the gender wage gap. At the same time, sectoral and occupational segregation continues to contribute to gender gaps both in terms of the number and quality of jobs. Furthermore, additional barriers to enter the

¹ IPCC. “Summary for Policymakers”, in C.B. Field, V.R. Barros, D.J. Dokken et al. (eds): *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1–32.

² ILO: *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).



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formal economy as well as discrimination, exploitation and violence at the workplace are of particular concern in the context of women with indigenous, tribal or ethnic identity, as well as migrant or disability status.

The impacts of climate change, and mitigation or adaptation measures that exclude women in decision-making and overlook their specific needs, can compound the challenges to achieving gender equality in the world of work. This, in turn, also poses a significant challenge to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. A global transformation, however, towards a low-carbon and sustainable economy, also presents positive opportunities for employment and the world of work more broadly. The Paris Agreement takes into account “*the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities*”.³ In this context, a just transition with inclusive climate action, can play a strong role in transforming gender norms and furthering gender equality, while ensuring women have the opportunity to participate as actors in combating climate change and spurring green growth. Greater engagement with the issue of gender, labour and climate change

³ See Paris Agreement on climate change

is critical for addressing existing and emerging inequalities and vulnerabilities, securing and protecting fundamental rights at work, and advancing women’s empowerment. In this context, the ILO’s *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*,⁴ which have been endorsed by ILO’s tripartite constituents, along with the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, including relevant International Labour Standards,⁵ provide for an important framework and serve as a point of departure for enhancing engagements with interlinked world of work issues regarding gender and climate change.

Some challenges for gender equality and decent work

Climate change related impacts pose a serious threat to the world of work and include, among others, heat waves, floods, droughts, changing rainfall patterns, rising sea levels, as well as other extreme weather events and slow onset events. The world of work is also impacted by some mitigation and adaptation measures, especially when groups that are already facing socio-economic vulnerabilities are excluded. Risks to decent work include economic and welfare losses, damage to health and productivity, forced labour migration, and the interrelation between such risks. At the same time, in sectors characterized by informality and decent work deficits, for instance agriculture, the vulnerabilities of workers are magnified due to climate impacts.⁶ Through the lens of gender, these risks have particular implications for women and achieving gender equality in the world of work.

The impacts of climate change, and actions that exclude women, may exacerbate the range of obstacles and socio-economic vulnerabilities that characterize decent work deficits for women. Between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 percent, and so did the male labour force participation rate from 79.9 to 76.1 percent. However, the chances for women to participate in the labour market, globally, remain nearly 27 percentage points lower than those for men. Women are also more likely to be unemployed than men, with unemployment particularly affecting young women more than young men in almost all regions of the world. At the same time, ILO estimates⁷ indicate that, globally, nearly 40 percent of women in wage employment do not

⁴ ILO: *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva, 2015).

⁵ For more information, see ILO’s website: <http://www.ilo.org/global/lang-en/index.htm>

⁶ ILO: *Technical Paper: A just transition to climate-resilient economies and societies: Issues and perspectives for the world of work* (2016).

⁷ ILO: *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

contribute to social protection, and proportions reach 63.2 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 74.2 per cent in Southern Asia, where informal employment is the dominant form of employment. Economic losses to a range of sectors due to climate impacts, as well as damage to health, for instance due to excessive heat at the workplace⁸ or extreme weather events, can have disproportionate impacts on women in the labour market where they already face barriers to accessing decent work, including discrimination. Moreover, with limited access to social protection, especially in the informal economy, climate change impacts can particularly exacerbate poverty and socio-economic vulnerabilities among women.



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The agricultural sector is an important case in point given that it is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and remains the most important source of employment for women in low-income and middle-income

⁸ International Organization for Migration, United Nations Development Programme, Climate Vulnerable Forum, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, UNI Global Union, International Organization of Employers and ACT Alliance: *Climate Change and Labour: Impacts of Heat in the Workplace* (2016).

countries. The ILO estimates⁹ that over 60 per cent of all working women in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa remain in agriculture, often unpaid or poorly paid while being concentrated in time and labour-intensive activities. Climate induced loss of livelihoods, reduction in incomes, or deterioration of working conditions in this sector have particular implications for women. At the same time, socio-economic vulnerabilities for some women can be compounded due to intersecting dynamics such as indigenous, tribal or ethnic identity, as well as migrant or disability status. Furthermore, extreme weather events, loss of income and livelihoods, or reduction of opportunities, can also fuel labour migration as an adaptation strategy. However, unregulated mobility risks exposing workers, especially women workers, to forced labour and other forms of exploitation, especially in the informal economy. For instance, many women from indigenous and tribal communities migrating to urban areas in search of income generating opportunities are concentrated in sectors prone to precarious working conditions and labour rights violations.¹⁰

The ILO also estimates¹¹ that women continue to be overrepresented in unpaid household and care work, often working longer hours per day than men when both paid work and unpaid work are taken into account. Climate change related impacts can heighten women's workload associated with care and household work, and also expose them to health and safety risks as well as productivity losses. For example, water scarcity, especially in rural areas, can enhance the daily workload of women who might be forced to walk and cover large distances in search of water. Moreover, covering large distances away from their villages, can increase the vulnerability of women to discrimination and sexual violence,¹² while also exacerbating health risks and productivity losses associated with exposure to varying temperatures, such as heat increases and extreme weather events. This further has serious consequences for women while performing other household and care work, or income generating activities, thereby impacting the broader social and economic life of families and communities.

Several opportunities for gender equality and decent work

A global transition towards a low-carbon and sustainable economy presents several opportunities for achieving

⁹ ILO: *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

¹⁰ ILO: *Technical Paper: Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work* (2016).

¹¹ ILO: *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

¹² For instance, in the case of indigenous women, see: J. Carling, J. Carino and L.N. Sherpa: *Asia Report on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples* (Chiang Mai, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2015).



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gender equality in the world of work. On the one hand, there will be some job losses, for instance, those associated with a transition away from the fossil fuel sector, where a just transition especially through strong social protection policies, including for women workers, will be critical. On the other hand however, employment in low-carbon industries and services, as well as those associated with the supply chain, will grow; substitution of jobs as a result of shifts in the economy from high to low carbon activities can also create new opportunities; and a redefinition of existing jobs and workplaces will further support a green economy.¹³ A just transition towards sustainable economies and societies can ensure that the negative effects are minimized, while the positive effects advance gender equality and decent work, rather than perpetuating or exacerbating gender disparities. Consequently, a just transition has the potential to spur green growth, build inclusive societies, transform gender norms, and contribute towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, for which women are fundamental actors.

¹³ ILO: *Technical Paper: A just transition to climate-resilient economies and societies: Issues and perspectives for the world of work* (2016).

The development of green sectors while ensuring a just transition of the workforce and enterprises, be it in the energy sector or those related to the manufacturing of green products, has a significant potential for addressing gender inequalities if equality of opportunity and treatment of women and men is established as a specific focus and goal from the outset. Such an approach presents an opportunity to ensure that sectoral and occupational segregation is not perpetuated, wage and skills gaps are eradicated, inclusive social dialogue is established, working conditions are improved, and social protection enhanced. At the same time, transformations and redefinition of jobs and workplaces can further improve skills, and reduce health and safety risks, which are often worse for women. Moreover, the creation of new labour market opportunities can facilitate the formalization of the informal economy jobs held by women. While building a low-carbon and sustainable economy, a just transition can ensure that women are not left behind, and their existing and potential contributions essential for stimulating green growth and achieving sustainable development for all, are not undermined.

Particularly in the rural economy, for instance in agriculture and forestry, grassroots women, including indigenous and tribal women,¹⁴ are already playing an important role as workers and entrepreneurs. Even though many continue to face exclusion in decision-making and lack access to decent work, as custodians of local and traditional knowledge, their contributions are unique and vital especially in the context of natural resource management, agriculture and forestry - sectors that are critical for both mitigation of, and adaptation to climate change. While these sectors continue to have a high concentration of women informal workers, a just transition in such sectors opens up enormous avenues to strengthen the participation of women in decision-making across all levels, secure sustainable livelihoods, improve working conditions, as well as advance traditional and local knowledge necessary for strong climate action. The benefits of a just transition in the rural economy

as inadequate social protection, weak measures to balance work and family, poor access to infrastructure and services in some countries and labour-saving technology in homes, as well as gender norms that perpetuate lack of access for women to decent jobs outside the home, serve to enhance the time women spend in such forms of work. This contributes to increasing women's workloads and exacerbating their disadvantaged position in the labour market. At the same time, the undervaluation of care work, both paid and unpaid, perpetuate poor working conditions for women, who form a vast majority of the employed care workforce, from domestic workers to nurses.¹⁵ Intersectional realities, such as indigenous and tribal identity or migrant status, also play a role in pushing women into informal working arrangements in the care economy. However, a just transition to a low-carbon and sustainable economy presents an opportunity to transform gender norms, spur social in-



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that furthers gender equality, flow from the household and community levels to the national and international levels, and can not only enhance food security but also increase resilience of communities and economies more broadly.

A just transition and the creation of decent work also have the potential of addressing the continued overrepresentation of women in unpaid household and care work. Factors such

¹⁴ For more information, see: ILO: *Technical Paper: Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work* (2016).

vestment towards infrastructure and services that take into account the situation of women, enhance social protection, and promote policies to recognize, reduce and redistribute household and care work. Effective and meaningful participation of women at all levels is critical for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as combating climate change, for which pursuing gender equality in the world of work through a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, is an important point of departure.

¹⁵ ILO: *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

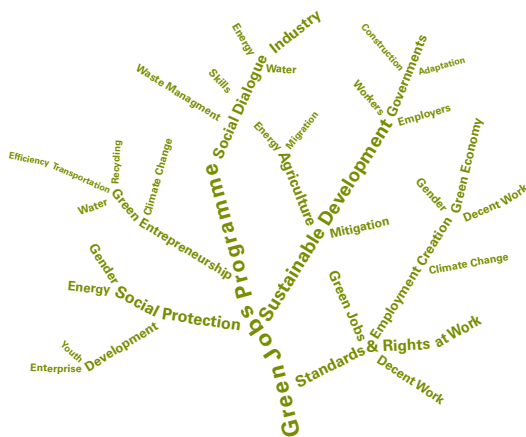
Key websites

ILO topical web portal on Gender Equality

ILO topical web portal on Green Jobs

ILO topical web portal on Care Economy

ILO topical web portal on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples



Green Jobs Programme
Enterprises Department

Email: greenjobs@ilo.org

International Labour Organization (ILO)

4, route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 799 6730

Website: www.ilo.org

Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch (GED)
Conditions of Work and Equality Department

Email: ged@ilo.org