

Climate Change Is Fueling Violence, and Women Bear the Brunt

All photos provided courtesy of Tess Vistro.

On March 28, over 6,000 agricultural workers and indigenous peoples gathered to [blockade a highway](#) in the Philippine state of Cotabato.

For last three months, these men and women had been unable to farm as a result of a protracted drought brought on by an [unprecedented El Niño](#) in the region. Their water reservoirs had long since gone dry and many of them were beginning to starve.

To make matters worse, their pleas for assistance from their government had been falling on deaf ears—a federal relief subsidy existed for just this scenario, but the subsidy, for reasons that remain unclear, was not being distributed.

The Cotabato farmers camped out on the interstate for four days, vowing not to leave until the government distributed [15,000 sacks of rice](#) they were entitled to. On the morning of April 1, the government finally showed up—and opened fire on the peaceful crowd.

By the time the dust settled, three farmers lay dead where they fell. Seven others would [die soon after](#) from injuries sustained during the massacre.

Women are disproportionately at risk from climate change.

“This is a climate change-fueled food crisis,” said Tess Vistro, the Deputy Secretary General of the National Federation of Peasant Women who has spent the last 20 years in the Philippines working to empower women in agriculture and documenting the fallout from climate change in the region. “The farmers came to the government for help, but instead of giving them rice, the government gave them bullets. If we are unable to address the spiraling greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, this will continue to happen—we’ll continue to see this kind of violence against rural people.”

Climate change-induced violence is [on the rise around the world](#). And although the

effects of climate-related catastrophe are likely to be increasingly felt in everyone's lives in the coming decades, there is one group that is poised to bear the brunt of this violent fallout: Women, particularly those in the developing world.



In recent years, a number of large studies produced by international relief agencies such as the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and the [United Nations](#) (UN) have focused on the intersection of gender and climate change.

The conclusions from these reports are distressing: Across the board, they've found that women are disproportionately at risk from climate change, although what this looks like on the ground is largely context dependent.

For the sake of just a few examples: more women than men died during the 2003 heat waves in Europe, and in general are [more at risk](#) during these events; in a survey covering more than two decades, the [London School of Economics](#) found that women were more likely to be killed by natural disasters and at a younger age than men; and during the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh that claimed 140,000 lives, [90 percent of these victims](#) were women.



The drought-affected farm of one of the farmers killed in Kidapawan, when a peaceful rally asking for subsidies and rice from the government was violently dispersed. Photo: Tudla Productions

For the most part, these disproportionate burdens borne by women are not due to any biological difference between the sexes—rather, like climate change itself, the problem is man-made.

“Typically women have less control over decision-making spheres, modes of transportation, accessing information, land tenure rights, land decision making, as well as housing and employment,” said Eleanor Blomstrom, program director of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization. “All these cultural norms that discriminate against women or put women in certain positions are the underlying structural reasons that climate change has a disproportionate impact on women.”

As Blomstrom points out, it is often the traditional roles of women (and their

accompanying limitations) within rural societies that place them at greater risk from climate change. Women, for example, are often expected to take care of domestic tasks like [gathering water](#) or firewood.

In cases of extreme drought, this might mean they have to walk many miles further to find these resources, not only further exposing them to gender-based violence and the harsh elements, but also limiting their free time to pursue other empowering activities, like getting an education or starting a small business. In the case of regions where the water itself has become toxic, women are also at [the greatest risk](#) of exposure to these deadly elements.

These observations are borne out by Vistro, who has seen this discrimination, and its detrimental effects, first hand in the Philippines. Despite the fact that women are legally allowed to own land and operate farms on their own, Vistro said that the government continues to leave women out of crucial land rights decisions, denying them access to important farming information and only distributing farming subsidies to the men.



Women pineapple pickers in Mindanao. Photo: Amihan, National Federation of Peasant Women

Moreover, when climate change induced disasters *do* strike, it is the women who play the **crucial role in relief efforts** despite being left out of policy decisions and trainings in emergency preparedness.

To drive her point home, Vistro cites scenes from the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded.

“The government trusted the men with disaster preparedness,” said Vistro. “They weren’t talking to the women. But after Haiyan, the women did not run for their lives immediately. They helped to bring the children, elderly and whatever household properties they could to safety. In anticipation of climate change related disasters like

Haiyan, women should be at the center of these preparations. They know how the community works because they're there. The government is missing half the significant solutions if they're only looking at solutions provided by men.”



The urgent need to bring women into conservation not only in regard to preparing for climate disasters, but also in mitigating the effects of climate change in the first place, is a theme that has largely guided both Vistro and Blomstrom’s decades-long careers.

If climate change disproportionately affects women as a result of socially constructed norms, Vistro and Blomstrom seek to subvert these norms by helping to organize women into unions and empower them through their [association in this mutual struggle](#).

From the [Windfang](#) renewable energy co-op in Germany to [Solar Sister](#) in Africa, climate oriented women’s associations provide a means for women around the world to leverage their voice and make sure that climate policies and technical solutions include perspectives from those likely to be affected by them the most.

Although this struggle is largely waged with an eye toward empowering women in the developing world, one of the most underrepresented groups when it comes to climate policy decisions, it is an important one for women the world over.

Women are significantly underrepresented in major climate change policy making bodies

Generally speaking, women are significantly underrepresented in major climate change policy making bodies. Take for example the International Panel on Climate Change’s fifth report: in [Working Group II](#), which was concerned with impacts, adaptation and vulnerability to climate change, only 27 percent of the contributors to the report were female; in [Working Group I](#), concerned with the physical science of climate change, only 18.5 percent of the contributors were women. Moreover, a 2007 study conducted by Nielsen and the University of Oxford found that [18 of the 22 most influential spokespeople](#) on climate change were male.

Even when women's groups do wage successful campaigns to get gender inclusive language into climate policy despite a general lack of representation, the results often fall far short of expectations. Case in point is last year's COP21 summit. In the leadup to the summit, Vistro, Blomstrom and their colleagues in the [Women's Gender Constituency](#), one of the nine stakeholder groups in the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), campaigned to have [operative language](#) about women's issues included in the final accord, which would bind signatories to structural changes that addressed the impact of climate change on women.

Gender Day at COP21 HD



At the conclusion of the summit, women got a shoutout in the [accord's preamble](#) and 'capacity building' sections, which states that "Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote, and consider their respective obligations on... the right to gender equality [and] the empowerment of women." While this is a start, language specifically addressing gender and outlining binding structural changes was conspicuously absent in critical sections such as "Technology" and "Mitigation," which was what Blomstrom, Vistro and their colleagues in the Women's Gender Constituency were really gunning for.

"We were pushing for gender to not only be in the preamble, but in the main text

because it would be stronger there,” said Vistro. “If it’s all in the preamble, it doesn’t mean a lot.”

According to Blomstrom, this is “where women’s voices are needed most” because these are generally the areas where the most important policy decisions are being made. If women don’t have a voice in developing technologies that will help the world mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, then these solutions run the risk of not only failing to address problems specific to a significant part of the world’s population, but also developing solutions which may in fact [do women greater harm](#).

Yet despite the flimsy commitment to structural changes that address the impact of climate change on women in Paris, Blomstrom and Vistro have not given up hope. They will continue to fight for a gender responsive language in the accord at the next climate conference, happening in Morocco this November. Or, as Vistro bluntly put it, “the battle begins at COP 22.”

Silicon Divide is a series about gender inequality in tech and science. Follow along [here](#).