

Tackling Climate Change Impacts from a Gendered Perspective in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Impacts of climate change disproportionately affect women due to their biological differences and gender roles prevalent within societal and familial structures. As a result, climate change amplifies the existing gender inequalities present in South African communities. This document-based research provides a comprehensive overview of the legal frameworks governing climate change in South Africa, with a focus on their responsiveness to the gendered impacts of climate change. It proffers a unique comparative approach to how women are affected differently from men by climate change impacts in the context of South Africa, a country that, because of its geographical location and other factors, is one of the most affected by climate change in Africa. The main legislation that addresses climate change in South Africa is the Climate Change Act of 2024. This Act aims to uphold environmental rights for all citizens. Although it incorporates gender perspectives on the impacts of climate change, it fails to provide comprehensive protection for women against these impacts. Impacts of climate change discussed in this paper include displacement, water scarcity, inadequate sanitation, health risks, gender-based violence, food insecurity, and reduced income levels. The study recommends that South Africa prioritise environmental rights education for women and girls, gendered climate change-related budgets, public awareness of developmental opportunities arising from climate change, the development of improved renewable energy sources, and the banning of plastics.

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INTRODUCTION

The progression South Africa has achieved in addressing the challenges faced by women because of the legacy of Apartheid is noteworthy. As of 2022, South Africa ranked among the leading African nations regarding women's representation in parliamentary positions, with women occupying 45,61% of these seats.¹ However, like many African countries, the emergence of climate change poses significant obstacles to South Africa's progress towards inclusive, sustainable development. The ramifications of climate change within the country are increasingly concerning. Devastating floods in KwaZulu-Natal in 2022, for instance, claimed over 440 lives and inflicted billions of Rands in infrastructure damage, making it one of the worst natural disasters in the nation's history.² African women leaders have recognised the complex interplay between climate change and gender inequality, noting that women and

¹ Saifaddin Galal, "Statista Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments in Africa as of 2022, June 30,2024," accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1248493/percentage-of-women-in-national-parliaments-in-african-countries/>.

² Business Tech, "New Climate Change Laws Planned for South Africa," April 20, 2022, accessed May 24, 2024. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/energy/579000/new-climate-change-laws-planned-for-south-africa/>.

girls disproportionately bear the adverse consequences of climate change.³ This vulnerability is linked to their socioeconomic status, which is often shaped by societal norms and power dynamics that favour men.⁴ Furthermore, researchers have indicated that natural disasters tend to decrease the life expectancy of women more significantly than that of men.⁵ Therefore, it is imperative to consider the impacts of climate change through a gendered lens.

Addressing the effects of climate change from a gendered perspective aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 13, which urges nations to “promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in the least developed countries and small island developing States,” focusing on marginalised constituencies, including women.⁶ This paper will begin by outlining the research methodology that was employed. Subsequently, it will provide an analysis of the South African legal framework on climate change. In the penultimate section, the impacts of climate change and its effects on women are discussed, followed by recommendations and conclusion.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative, document-based research methodology. The qualitative method involves the application and analysis of existing documents to gain insight into the chosen topic.⁷ Data from legal frameworks on climate change in South Africa was collected from international conventions, regional conventions, and national legislations. According to Black, document-based research allows scholars to interpret phenomena based on meanings derived from established sources.⁸ These legal frameworks were interpreted to establish the extent to which they respond to the gendered effects of climate change impacts. Additional sources, which include law reports, textbooks, book chapters, journal articles, online documents and newspaper articles, were quite helpful in providing insights on how climate change impacts affect men and women.

AN OVERVIEW OF SOUTH AFRICA’S INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

This section gives an overview of the legal frameworks that address climate change in South Africa, starting with the international agreements, followed by regional treaties, and national legislations. The discussion will critically assess the effectiveness of these legal mechanisms in safeguarding women’s rights and mitigating the impacts of climate change, specifically on vulnerable female populations.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

The UNFCCC stands out as one of the few international conventions that has achieved near universal ratification, encompassing 198 member states, including South Africa.⁹ It delineates specific obligations for parties regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation. Notably, Article 4(1) obliges parties to establish national inventories of their greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, Articles 5 and 6 stipulate the preparation and execution of programs focused on adaptation and mitigation strategies, the deployment of environmentally sound technologies, sustainable carbon sink management, climate research, and education and public awareness on climate change. Article 12 requires parties to submit reports detailing their progress in implementing the convention. However, a critical gap in the UNFCCC framework is the absence of explicit requirements for member states to formulate gender-responsive

³ United Nations Women, “African Women to Play Key Roles in Mitigating Impacts of Climate Change,” March 18, 2022, accessed on January 5, 2025. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/news/2022/03/african-women-to-play-key-roles-in-mitigating-impacts-of-climate-change>. African women to play key roles in mitigating impacts of climate change %7C UN Women – Headquarters.

⁴ Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies, “Just Transition in South Africa: The Case for a Gender Just Approach,” *Policy Brief*, April 2021, accessed January 5, 2025. https://www.tips.org.za/just-transition/item/download/2181_aea98e7a22103d115daa98a82d80a05e.

⁵ Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plümper, “The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981–2002,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97, no. 3 (2007): 551–66.

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Sustainable Development Goal 16,” 2023, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

⁷ Laura Maruster, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage, 2013).

⁸ Nick Black, “Why We Need Qualitative Research,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 48, no. 5 (1994): 425.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly,” A/RES/48/189, January 20, 1994, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/1994/en/26583>.

climate change policies, which has significant implications for women's participation in climate change-related decision-making and development processes.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

CEDAW, which is widely regarded as an international women's Bill of rights, recognises that women's rights are crucial and member states must strive to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women.¹⁰ Article 3 is particularly relevant as it underscores the necessity of including women across all sectors, which may be interpreted to encompass climate change, to facilitate their comprehensive development and advancement. Furthermore, the Committee on the CEDAW in its General Recommendation 37 asserts the importance of promoting gender equality in efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change.¹¹ States are encouraged to incorporate gender mainstreaming into all facets of climate change initiatives. South Africa has committed to the obligations outlined in the CEDAW since its ratification in 1995.

African Union Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2032 (AU Strategic Plan)

AU Strategic Plan is a regional action plan aimed at the continental efforts to address the impacts of climate change. It supports regional collaboration on climate change and 'provides a broad roadmap for African countries in priority and action areas for enhanced climate cooperation and long-term, climate resilient development'.¹² In Paragraph 4.3.3. , the AU Strategic Plan stated the concern of inequalities and socio-economic status of vulnerable groups that are not being adequately addressed by many African countries.¹³ African countries are therefore urged to adopt Climate Change responses that address the needs of vulnerable groups such as women, children and people with disabilities. Main priorities of the AU Strategic plan include building resilience capacities for adaptation and reducing vulnerabilities to climate change impacts on the vulnerable communities and groups.¹⁴ South Africa's commitment to this AU Strategic Plan was exerted at its launch, and this brings the country to a broader regional obligation to work towards the priorities set out therein.¹⁵

Southern African Development Community Protocol on Environmental Management for Sustainable Development (SADC Protocol)

South Africa's ratification of the SADC Protocol underscores the country's dedication to environmental stewardship.¹⁶ Article 12 of the SADC protocol compels member states to adopt the "necessary legislative and administrative measures to enhance adaptation to the impacts of climate change... and to take nationally appropriate voluntary climate change mitigation measures." Although the article lacks gender-specific language, its scope permits member states to consider the unique challenges faced by women in their climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

¹⁰ Habib Sulthon Asnawi and Habib Ismail, "Discrimination against Wife in the Perspective of CEDAW and Islam Mubādalah," *Ijtihad : Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 20, no. 2 (2020): 253–68. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijtihad.v20i2.253-268>.

¹¹ United Nations, "Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women: General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-Related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction in the Context of Climate Change," March 15, 2018, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/general-recommendation-no-37-gender-related-dimensions-disaster-risk-reduction-context>.

¹² International Climate Initiative, "Milestone for South Africa's Climate Policy" July 26, 2024, accessed July 18, 2025. <https://www.international-climate-initiative.com/en/iki-media/news/milestone-for-south-africas-climate-policy/>.

¹³ African Union, "Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2032", February 8, 2023, accessed July 18, 2025. https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/41959-doc-CC_Strategy_and_Action_Plan_2022-2032_08_02_23_Single_Print_Ready.pdf.

¹⁴ Garyn Rapson, Paula-Ann Novotny and Carma Rossouw. "African Union Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan," October 7, 2022, accessed July 18, 2025. https://www.webberwentzel.com/News/Pages/african-union-climate-change-and-resilient-development-strategy-and-action-plan.aspx?gclid=Cj0KCQiAyMKbBhD1ARIsANs7rEFH67FI070tMS7gQCHijCFv9110doKPrXkcCzA0b3xTurbr57eP0gaAj59EALw_wcB#:~:text=%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8B%E2%80%8B,in%20addressing%20climate%20change%20issues..

¹⁵ African Union, "Statement by H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the Republic of South Africa and Outgoing Coordinator of the Committee of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change", February 6, 2022, accessed July 18, 2025. <https://au.int/fr/node/41459>.

¹⁶ Southern African Development Community, "Protocol on Environmental Management for Sustainable Development," August 14, 2014, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.tralac.org/resources/our-resources/4857-sadc-legal-texts-and-policy-documents.html>.

Moreover, the Southern African Development Community Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2020–2030 (SADC Action Plan), highlights the importance of regional legal integration and harmonisation, particularly within the sectors of agriculture, biodiversity, and waste management.¹⁷ These areas are particularly significant for women. Research conducted by Anderson et al, indicates that women’s participation in agriculture remains statistically lower than that of men.¹⁸ Data from 2020 indicates that women in South Africa who were farm owners stood at 21%, reflecting this disparity.¹⁹ Addressing climate change impacts within the agricultural sector necessitates a gendered approach that simultaneously focuses on women’s empowerment and on climate change adaptation strategies. Anderson et al argue that ‘investing in female farmers has economic benefits as a low-risk proposition’.²⁰ The future of women in agriculture is poised to drive significant economic growth on a global scale.²¹ Moreover, women’s engagement is intricately linked to biodiversity outcomes. A report from the South African National Biodiversity Institute highlights the need for a gendered lens when confronting challenges related to biodiversity conservation, which include the adverse effects of climate change.²² Additionally, waste management practices are deeply intertwined with gender roles and stereotypes, underscoring the importance of integrating gender considerations into environmental strategies.²³

National Environmental Management Act, 1998 (NEMA)

The preamble of NEMA acknowledges that South Africa has an environment that poses risks to public health and prescribes the State, in a mandatory tone, to ‘respect, protect, promote and fulfil the social, economic and environmental rights of everyone and strive to meet the basic needs of previously disadvantaged communities.’ Section 2 of NEMA delineates the principles of environmental management that all organs of state in South Africa are required to apply. These principles emphasise the importance of considering the roles and participation of women and youth in environmental management and assessment processes.²⁴ In the court case, *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg v Minister of Environmental Affairs and others*, it was established that climate change constitutes a significant consideration within environmental impact assessments.²⁵ This case reinforces the obligation of environmental authorities to conduct thorough evaluations of environmental impacts and to carefully consider the impacts of climate change in their assessment. Therefore, in their assessments, there exists an opportunity to address women’s issues.

Disaster Management Act, 2002

This legislation establishes a framework for integrated and coordinated disaster management, emphasising the prevention and reduction of disaster risks, the mitigation of disaster impacts, emergency preparedness, and the prompt and effective response to post-disaster recovery efforts. Section 1 broadly defines disaster to include events related to climate change, thus integrating climate change considerations into disaster management practices. Furthermore, Section 5 of the Disaster Management Act establishes a National Disaster Management Advisory Forum, which serves as a strategic vehicle for disaster management. Although the forum’s membership includes representatives from various

¹⁷ Southern African Development Community, “Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan,” July 24, 2015, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.sadc.int/document/sadc-climate-change-strategy-and-action-plan-english>.

¹⁸ Leigh C. Anderson et al., “Economic Benefits of Empowering Women in Agriculture: Assumptions and Evidence,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 57, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 193–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1769071>.

¹⁹ Gys M. Loubser, “Women in Agriculture: An Exploratory Study on Women and Gender Equality in South African Agriculture,” *A Project by The Sustainability Initiative of South Africa & the Western Cape Department of Agriculture*, 2020, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://siza.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Women-in-Agriculture-Research-Report-2020-Print-version.pdf>.

²⁰ Anderson et al., “Economic Benefits of Empowering Women in Agriculture: Assumptions and Evidence.”

²¹ Loubser, “Women in Agriculture: An Exploratory Study on Women and Gender Equality in South African Agriculture.”

²² South African National Biodiversity Institute, “Draft Report: Gender Analysis of the Biodiversity and Land Use Project,” May 2019, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.sanbi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/5.-SANBI-Biodiversity-and-Land-Use-Project-Gender-Analysis-Report-20201002.pdf>.

²³ United Nations Environment Programme, “Gender and Waste Management,” accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.unep.org/ietc/what-we-do/gender-and-waste-management#:~:text=When waste management formalizes%2C, women, and effective waste management operations.>

²⁴ South African Government, *National Environmental Management Act*, (South Africa: Official Information Services, South Africa, 1998).

²⁵ *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg v Minister of Environmental Affairs* 2017 2 All SA 519 (GP) par 2.

sectors, it is gender neutral. The appointment of women to the National Disaster Management Forum remains at the discretion of the Executive, a scenario which does not make it a legal requirement for female representation within the Forum.

Carbon Tax Act, 2019

This piece of legislation encourages energy firms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and holds polluters accountable as they pay for the environmental damage they cause.²⁶ Tax will thus be reduced to those firms which would have reduced their greenhouse gas emissions, yet it will be higher for those firms that do not take measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The tax being collected under this Act stands as a positive initiative to raise funds for climate change adaptation measures. If the revenue collected under the Carbon Tax Act could be channelled to address climate change impacts, with those strategies for women being adequately allocated a separate budget, women would stand to benefit.²⁷ Furthermore, reduced greenhouse gas emissions benefit everyone, including women, as they provide a good mitigation for climate change impacts.

The Climate Change Act, 2024 (Climate Change Act).

The Climate Change Act in its preamble acknowledges the effects of climate change on access to health, access to food and water, biodiversity, infrastructure, human settlements and infrastructure destruction. Furthermore, Section 3 (f) provides that:

The interpretation and application of this Act must be guided by, the need for decision-making to consider the special needs and circumstances of localities and people that are particularly vulnerable to the diverse effects of climate change, including vulnerable workers and groups such as women, especially poor and rural women, children, especially infants and child-headed families, the aged, the poor, the sick and persons with disabilities.’

Furthermore, principle 3(k) underscores the necessity for an interpretative framework that bolsters public understanding of the root causes and effects of climate change. It emphasises the importance of fostering engagement and proactive involvement across all societal tiers.

Before the enactment of the Climate Change Act, the Presidential Climate Commission served as the primary national entity addressing climate change. The Climate Change Act enshrined the commission’s role and provided clarity regarding its composition. Section 12(2) states, ‘the composition of the Presidential Climate Commission must (a) broadly reflect the demographics and gender composition of the Republic.’ This provision ensures that women are actively included in decision-making processes regarding the impacts and responses of climate change. This enhances women’s agency in climate change impact initiatives. The Presidential Climate Commission is tasked with several key functions, including providing expert advice on climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. In executing its responsibilities, the Presidential Climate Commission has the authority to form specialised committees to delegate certain responsibilities effectively. The Climate Change Act also requires the adoption of adaptation strategies that account for existing vulnerabilities. These strategies must focus on reducing identified vulnerabilities by building adaptive capacity and resilience within communities.^{28,29} Although it incorporates gender-specific perspectives on the impacts of climate change, it fails to provide comprehensive protections for women against these effects. Furthermore, the Climate Change Act awaits the presidential pronouncement on its enforcement; therefore, its benefits are yet to be enjoyed by South African women.

²⁶ South African Revenue Service. “Carbon Tax,” 2019, accessed July 17, 2025. <https://www.sars.gov.za/customs-and-excise/excise/environmental-levy-products/carbon-tax/>.

²⁷ South African Government, “Carbon Tax Act.”

²⁸ South African Government, “Climate Change Act, 2024, Section 20(2(a) and (D)),” 2024.

²⁹ South African Government, Climate Change Act, (South Africa: Official Information Services, 2024) Section 20(2(a) and (D)).

Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Constitution)

The Constitution, as the supreme law in the country, incorporates provisions for environmental rights that safeguard ecological integrity and promote sustainable development.³⁰ Section 24(b) of the Constitution provides that “everyone has the right to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation [and] promote conservation.” This provision guarantees every individual in South Africa the right to a safe environment. When considered in conjunction with Section 9(3) of the Constitution, which mandates the government to implement measures to empower previously disadvantaged groups, women stand to gain significant benefits. This entails that the government must adopt reasonable initiatives that facilitate women's and other vulnerable groups' enjoyment of environmental rights. Any actions directed towards enabling women to access and benefit from these rights will, in turn, contribute to their ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

Climate change disproportionately affects women, exacerbating existing gender inequalities and hindering economic development.³¹ The case of *Minister of Public Works v Kyalami Ridge Environmental Association* provided some effects of climate change in the context of the floods in the following words:

The flood victims were living in overcrowded and unhealthy circumstances without sufficient water and sanitation. Huts were later erected on the land in place of the tents, but this did little to improve the conditions in which the flood victims were living.³²

This section discusses the gendered effects of climate change, highlighting the differential impacts on men and women.

Displacement and Loss of Homes

As of 2023, the global number of individuals displaced due to the adverse effects of climate change has reached approximately 6.6 million.³³ In recent years, South Africa has witnessed an escalation in rainfall in the form of cyclones and storms, resulting in notable damage to the country's infrastructure. At the beginning of January 2024, it witnessed severe floods in KwaZulu Natal and the Free State provinces, affecting about 1226 households and rendering 6418 people homeless.³⁴ Furthermore, in April 2024, KwaZulu-Natal and the Northwest provinces experienced significant rainfall, leading to the displacement of 1,395 individuals due to damage to their residences. Reports also indicate that many South Africans suffered the loss of their homes between May and June because of flooding in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal regions.³⁵

Climate change-related infrastructure destruction causes displacement and migration. In the year 2000, the South African government had to deal with a displacement issue that ultimately resulted in legal proceedings in the case of the *Minister of Public Works and others v Kyalami Ridge Environmental Association and others*.³⁶ This case came as a result of the aftermath of floods where approximately 300 families in Alexandra township in Johannesburg, the capital city of South Africa, were displaced from their homes, prompting the government to propose the establishment of a transit camp. However,

³⁰ South African Government, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa", Author: Official Information Services, South Africa, (1996) Section 2."

³¹ Agnes R. Quisumbing, Neha Kumar, and Julia A. Behrman, "Do Shocks Affect Men's and Women's Assets Differently? Evidence from Bangladesh and Uganda," *Development Policy Review* 36, no. 1 (2018): 3–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12235>; See also Cecilia Sorensen et al., "Climate Change and Women's Health: Impacts and Policy Directions," *PLOS Medicine* 15, no. 7 (2018): e1002603, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002603>.

³² *Minister of Public Works v Kyalami Ridge Environmental Association* 2001 7 BCLR 652 (CC) par 2.

³³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Internal Displacement in 2024 Monitoring the Crisis, Measuring the Progress," 2024, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://story.internal-displacement.org/internal-displacement-in-2024-monitoring-the-crisis-measuring-progress/>.

³⁴ South Africa Storm Surge, "DREF Operational Update MDRZA016," accessed January 2, 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/south-africa-storm-surge-dref-operational-update-mdrza016>.

³⁵ South Africa Storm Surge, "DREF Operational Update MDRZA016."

³⁶ *Minister of Public Works v Kyalami Ridge Environmental Association* 2001 7 BCLR 652 (CC) Par 2.

affected residents initiated legal proceedings to halt the construction of the transit camp, citing deficiencies in legislative compliance and the lack of proper consultation. This case exemplifies the intricate challenges associated with forced displacement and underscores the government's legal responsibility to secure alternative housing for flood victims. Key challenges include identifying suitable land, securing adequate resources for construction, ensuring adherence to legislative requirements, and conducting the project in a manner that upholds procedural fairness.

While displacement affects all people, it has uneven implications for men and women.³⁷ Considering that women in South Africa already encounter systemic barriers to accessing housing within the existing social framework, their vulnerabilities towards homelessness are exacerbated by climate change-related displacements and infrastructure destruction.³⁸ Internal displacement generally amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities between men and women, with women suffering disadvantage since they are economically, legally, and socially less empowered than men.³⁹

Food Insecurity

Globally, women and girls represent the predominant demographic experiencing food insecurity because of climate change.⁴⁰ Climate change also limits women's access to land and natural resources.⁴¹ Adverse marital and inheritance legal frameworks and cultural norms significantly compound women's limited access to land, hindering their capacity to reallocate land in the face of drought and land degradation.⁴² Rural and Indigenous women experience a disproportionate impact of food insecurity due to their limited access to arable land. Their marginalised position within patriarchal societies, coupled with the commodification of land and natural resources, exacerbates this issue significantly.⁴³ Food insecurity due to climate change also results from the decrease in crop productivity caused by changes in precipitation, temperature, and climate viability.⁴⁴ Floods can wash away crops before harvest and decrease crop yields.⁴⁵ The decrease in agricultural production inevitably reduces the market supply of agricultural commodities, while their demand increases, resulting in a high cost of living.

Reduced Income and Rising Cost of Living for Women

In South Africa, women mainly work as low-skilled workers and in climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, food processing, textiles, and tourism.⁴⁶ Floods and droughts increase the already worrying unemployment rate of women, which is already higher than that of men. For instance, in 2021, 36.8 per cent of women were unemployed, and 32.4 per cent of men were unemployed.⁴⁷ Climate change disproportionately affects women's economic stability by diminishing their income-generating opportunities while simultaneously escalating their living costs. Given that women predominantly

³⁷ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "A Gender Perspective on Internal Displacement," accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/focus-areas/gender-perspective-internal-displacement/#:~:text=In many societies%2C they are,than their non-displaced peers.>

³⁸ Kirsty McLean and Lilian Chenwi, "'A Woman'S Home Is Her Castle?' – Poor Women And Housing Inadequacy In South Africa," *South African Journal on Human Rights* 25, no. 3 (2009): 517–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19962126.2009.11865215>.

³⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "A Gender Perspective on Internal Displacement."

⁴⁰ International Development Law Organisation, "Women, Food, Land: Exploring Rule of Law Linkages," 2017, accessed January 2, 2025. https://www.idlo.int/sites/default/files/pdfs/publications/Women%2C Land%2C Food-Exploring Rule of Law Linkages_0.pdf.

⁴¹ Elise Scalise, "The Gender Gap, Assessing and Measuring Gender Related Land Inequality International Land Coalition," accessed January 2, 2025. <https://resourceequity.org/record/3174-the-gender-gap-assessing-and-measuring-the-gender-related-land-inequality/>.

⁴² International Development Law Organisation, "Women, Food, Land: Exploring Rule of Law Linkages."

⁴³ Stefania Errico, "Women's Right to Land Between Collective and Individual Dimensions. Some Insights From Sub-Saharan Africa," *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 5 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.690321>.

⁴⁴ Alvaro Calzadilla et al., "Climate Change and Agriculture: Impacts and Adaptation Options in South Africa," *Water Resources and Economics* 5 (2014): 24–48.

⁴⁵ Martin Henseler and Helene Maisonnave, "Understanding the Climate Change-Gender Nexus: The Economic Impacts on South African Women," (2024) . Working Papers hal-04535846, HAL, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/hal/wpaper/hal-04535846.html>.

⁴⁶ Gabriel Espi, David Francis, and Imraan Valodia, "Gender Inequality in the South African Labour Market: Insights from the Employment Equity Act Data," *Agenda* 33, no. 4 (2019): 44–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2019.1674675>; Carlos Gradín, "Occupational Gender Segregation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Feminist Economics* 27, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 102–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2021.1906439>; Jacqueline Mosomi, *Distributional Changes in the Gender Wage Gap in the Post-Apartheid South African Labour Market*, vol. 2019 (UNU-WIDER, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2019/651-7>.

⁴⁷ Department of Statistics South Africa, "Youth Unemployment Still High in Q1: 2018," Data Stories, July 15, 2018,. Accessed January 2, 2025. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=11129>.

shoulder the burden of domestic responsibilities, this limits their availability to engage in economic activities, further entrenching gender disparities in economic participation.⁴⁸

Water Scarcity

Water scarcity is increasingly recognised as a global issue, driven by multiple factors, including climate change. Over the past century, the water demand has surged sixfold.⁴⁹ The current global escalation of water shortages is so worrying, prompting the United Nations to project that ‘by 2025, two-thirds of the world’s population will be living with serious water shortages or almost no water at all’.⁵⁰ South Africa is currently facing water scarcity, largely due to its vulnerability to climate change impacts, which include variable rainfall patterns and elevated evaporative demand.⁵¹ Floods also cause water infrastructure damage, resulting in an inadequate water supply.⁵² The nation has been ranked 30th among the countries in the world most affected by water scarcity.⁵³ The water situation in South Africa is so serious that one in three South Africans lacks access to safe drinking water.⁵⁴ The shortage of safe water increases global inequalities.⁵⁵ The burden of water procurement for domestic use disproportionately impacts women, particularly in rural regions, where they face increased responsibilities. This dynamic exacerbates the challenges associated with water accessibility and availability in these communities.⁵⁶ Women will have to spend a lot of time fetching water for their homes and walking long distances to water sources.⁵⁷ This increased time required to fetch water widens the gap between paid and unpaid work for men and women.

Sanitation

In regions experiencing water scarcity, sanitation challenges are often exacerbated. The deterioration of sanitation infrastructure is frequently a consequence of flooding, which can lead to significant public health risks and environmental degradation.⁵⁸ In certain circumstances, people affected by flooding may be relocated to areas that lack adequate sanitation services. This issue disproportionately impacts men and women, and women bear a significantly greater burden. Due to biological needs, women require dignified methods for the disposal of sanitary products, as well as appropriate facilities to wash their bodies and clothing during menstruation.⁵⁹ Pregnant and breastfeeding women require specialised support that addresses their distinct physiological and psychological needs, which differ significantly from those of non-pregnant women and men.

Health Concerns

In situations where water and sanitation services are compromised, there is a higher risk of disease outbreaks, particularly diarrheal diseases. These illnesses can proliferate due to the contamination of drinking water sources and the surrounding environment. This often occurs when individuals are compelled to source water from contaminated supplies and resort to open defecation practices, thereby

⁴⁸ Marzia Fontana and Yana Van Der Meulen Rodgers, “Gender Dimensions in the Analysis of Macro-Poverty Linkages,” *Development Policy Review* 23, no. 3 (2005): 333–49.

⁴⁹ Nicola Bulled, “The Effects of Water Insecurity and Emotional Distress on Civic Action for Improved Water Infrastructure in Rural South Africa,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2017): 133–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12270>.

⁵⁰ Bulled, “The Effects of Water Insecurity and Emotional Distress on Civic Action for Improved Water Infrastructure in Rural South Africa.” 133.

⁵¹ Robert Scholes and Francois Engelbrecht, “Climate Impacts in Southern Africa during the 21st Century,” *Report for Earthjustice and the Centre for Environmental Rights. Global Change Institute, University of Witwatersrand*, 2021. Accessed January 5, 2025. https://cer.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Climate-impacts-in-South-Africa_Final_September_2021.FINAL_.pdf.

⁵² Om Prasad Gautam et al., “Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Interventions: An Urgent Requirement in Post-Flood Nepal,” *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 17, no. 11 (2017): 1118–19.

⁵³ Centre for Environmental Rights, “Protecting Water Means Protecting Women,” August 13, 2020. Accessed May 24, 2024. <https://cer.org.za/news/protecting-water-means-protecting-women-2#:~:text=South Africa is a water, polluter of scarce water resources.>

⁵⁴ Centre for Environmental Rights, “Protecting Water Means Protecting Women.”

⁵⁵ Bulled, “The Effects of Water Insecurity and Emotional Distress on Civic Action for Improved Water Infrastructure in Rural South Africa.”

⁵⁶ Henseler and Maisonnave, “Understanding the Climate Change-Gender Nexus: The Economic Impacts on South African Women.”

⁵⁷ Centre for Environmental Rights, “Protecting water means protecting women.”

⁵⁸ Gautam et al., “Water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions: an urgent requirement in post-flood Nepal,” 1118.

⁵⁹ Gautam et al., “Water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions: an urgent requirement in post-flood Nepal,” 1118.

exacerbating the cycle of infection.⁶⁰ The closure of local health centres and the damage to health infrastructure because of floods pose significant challenges to public health as well. Research conducted in October 2012, following the floods in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, revealed that the water quality within the flood-affected areas was contaminated, presenting a considerable risk of outbreaks of infectious diseases.⁶¹ Disease outbreaks during and after floods are not unique to South Africa. In the year 2000, a study conducted on the outbreak of diseases following a flood in Mozambique indicated that 85% of the 2,611 patients who received medical care within nine days were afflicted with malaria, respiratory infectious diseases, and diarrheal illnesses.⁶² Another research by Sidley, after another flood in Mozambique in 2008, corroborates this finding.⁶³ According to Sidley, ‘A cholera outbreak has hit Mozambique after severe flooding, with many people dying from the disease, which has spread to the capital, Maputo.’⁶⁴ There were deaths in Mozambique as a result of the disease outbreaks.⁶⁵

According to Wenham et al, it must be recognised that disease outbreaks affect women and men differently.⁶⁶ The susceptibility to diseases exhibits gender-based differences, influenced by varying levels of exposure linked to societal roles. For example, during a diarrheal outbreak in South Africa, incidence rates were notably elevated among children under five years of age.⁶⁷ One of the societal roles traditionally assigned to women involves caregiving, particularly for children and the ill. This responsibility often places women in close proximity to the sick risking being infected. Women will also frequently visit potentially contaminated water sources, increasing their susceptibility to disease outbreaks. Their frequent interaction with these environments increases the risk of exposure to pathogens.

Certain diseases have emerged as a consequence of heat waves associated with climate change. The average global temperature has risen by 1.2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, with many African countries experiencing increases that exceed the global average.⁶⁸ In South Africa, 3.4% of the mortality rate is linked to diseases associated with elevated temperature exposure.⁶⁹ A study conducted in Johannesburg, the capital city of South Africa, has demonstrated that the country has recorded heat-related impacts on pregnancy outcomes.⁷⁰ Women’s exposure to heat waves is also increased due to their participation in outdoor activities related to social, cultural, and religious activities.⁷¹ This challenge is more in the hands of rural pregnant women who lack knowledge about the harmful effects of heat waves, yet those who may know would have little or no means of reducing heat exposure.⁷²

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence has emerged as a significant consequence of climate change, particularly affecting women in terms of their participation in labour markets, engagement in economic activities, and access to land rights.⁷³ The International Development Law Organisation reported that ‘GBV is used

⁶⁰ Gautam et al, “Water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions: an urgent requirement in post-flood Nepal,” 1118.

⁶¹ Roman Tandlich, Mbonisi Ncube, and Bongumusa M. Zuma, “A Case Study on the Health Risks Related to Flood Disasters in South Africa,” *Journal of Disaster Research* 11, no. 4 (2016): 732–41.

⁶² Hisayoshi Kondo et al., “Post-Flood—Infectious Diseases in Mozambique,” *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 17, no. 3 (2002): 126–33.

⁶³ Pat Sidley, “Floods in Southern Africa Result in Cholera Outbreak and Displacement,” *BMJ* 336, no. 7642 (2008): 471.2–471, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39503.700903.DB>.

⁶⁴ Sidley, “Floods in Southern Africa Result in Cholera Outbreak and Displacement.”

⁶⁵ Sidley, “Floods in Southern Africa Result in Cholera Outbreak and Displacement.”

⁶⁶ Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, and Rosemary Morgan, “COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10227 (2020): 846–48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30526-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2).

⁶⁷ Noah Scovronick et al, “The association between ambient temperature and mortality in South Africa: a time-series analysis”, *Environ Res.* 161 No 229 (2018) 235.

⁶⁸ Matthew F Chersich et al., “Increasing Global Temperatures Threaten Gains in Maternal and Newborn Health in Africa: A Review of Impacts and an Adaptation Framework,” *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics* 160, no. 2 (2023): 421–29.

⁶⁹ Noah Scovronick et al., “The Association between Ambient Temperature and Mortality in South Africa: A Time-Series Analysis,” *Environmental Research* 161 (2018): 229–35.

⁷⁰ Scovronick et al., “The Association between Ambient Temperature and Mortality in South Africa: A Time-Series Analysis.”

⁷¹ Chersich et al., “Increasing Global Temperatures Threaten Gains in Maternal and Newborn Health in Africa: A Review of Impacts and an Adaptation Framework.”

⁷² Chersich et al., “Increasing Global Temperatures Threaten Gains in Maternal and Newborn Health in Africa: A Review of Impacts and an Adaptation Framework.”

⁷³ Anik Gevers, Tina Musuya, and Paul Bukuluki, “Why Climate Change Fuels Violence against Women,” *United Nations Development*

to control women's access to natural resources in the context of scarcity and environmental degradation, for example, with coercive force deployed to manage negotiations over land rights, or authorities demanding sexual favours in return for land use rights.⁷⁴ Zack argues that the convergence of gender dynamics with climate change and natural disasters exacerbates gender-based violence directed at environmental activists. Moreover, this intersection contributes to the marginalisation of women in climate-related decision-making processes and highlights the inadequacy of funding mechanisms that are sensitive to gender considerations within climate change initiatives.⁷⁵ Furthermore, women are at greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence due to increased gender roles and responsibilities resulting from resource scarcity, particularly in accessing water and fuel.⁷⁶ Domestic violence related to climate change also happens in the confines of homes due to 'heightened interpersonal and social tension, erosion of community and cultural ties, and scarcity of food and basic provisions'.⁷⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental rights education for women and girls

Addressing climate-related issues requires an inclusive approach that takes into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of various groups of women. There is a critical need to enhance legal empowerment for women and girls, particularly indigenous women and those living in rural areas. Legal empowerment enables women to fully engage in discussions surrounding climate change, allowing them to assert their environmental rights in the context of the ongoing climate crisis. This empowerment can help them adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and illuminate the unique challenges faced by particularly vulnerable populations, such as young women and Indigenous women. In the absence of State support, these individuals often struggle to access information and knowledge regarding climate change.

Gendered Climate change-related budgets

South Africa requires a comprehensive policy framework to regulate fiscal provisions and allocations aimed at addressing the impacts of climate change on women. Such budgets should encompass both technical and financial support for women-led movements and civil society organisations, enabling their contributions to global climate and biodiversity negotiations. Furthermore, this funding must ensure that mitigation and adaptation strategies are inclusive, effectively reaching the most vulnerable categories of women.

Awareness of the opportunities of climate change.

Notably, climate change impacts present certain opportunities, such as meeting fundamental needs, including food security, clothing, and the development of housing and educational facilities. Policymaking in response to climate change should prioritise the advantages and opportunities that arise, particularly for women.

Improve renewable energy sources

The implementation of renewable energy serves to alleviate the burdens imposed on women as a result of climate change. Although South Africa has made considerable progress in the adoption of renewable energy sources, the country needs to do more in its overall development in this sector. South Africa must emulate the example set by Morocco, where renewable energy constitutes one-third of the nation's

Programme 28 (2020). Accessed July 17, 2025. <https://www.undp.org/blog/why-climate-change-fuels-violence-against-women>.

⁷⁴ International Development Law Organisation, "Climate Justice for Women and Girls: A Rule of Law Approach to Feminist Climate Action," March 16, 2022, accessed January 2, 2025. <https://www.idlo.int/publications/climate-justice-women-and-girls-rule-law-approach-feminist-climate-action#:~:text=An explicitly feminist approach to,effective climate laws and policies>.

⁷⁵ Gabriela C. Zack, "5 Facts about Gender Equality and Climate Change," United Nations Foundations, March 16, 2022, accessed January 5, 2025. <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/five-facts-about-gender-equality-and-climate-change/>.

⁷⁶ Marni Sommer et al., "Violence, Gender and WASH: Spurring Action on a Complex, under-Documented and Sensitive Topic," *Environment and Urbanization* 27, no. 1 (2015): 105–16.

⁷⁷ Itzá Castañeda Camey et al., "Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages," *The Violence of Inequality; Wen, J., Ed.; IUCN: Gland, Switzerland*, 2020.

electricity capacity.⁷⁸ In 2020, Morocco set an ambitious goal to generate 42% of its total installed electricity capacity from renewable energy sources. This target was revised in 2021, escalating the target to 52% by 2030. Morocco exemplifies how strategic prioritisation of renewable energy can effectively drive significant advancements in energy transition and sustainability. Renewable energy addresses the challenge of fuel scarcity experienced by women by reducing the reliance on firewood and minimising cooking-related emissions. By doing so, it aims to improve the quality of life of women by decreasing the time allocated to unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, as well as addressing the safety risks associated with the collection and combustion of firewood.⁷⁹

Banning of Plastic Bags

Rwanda has recognised the adverse environmental effects of plastic bags, particularly their role in exacerbating flooding and impeding agricultural productivity.⁸⁰ Rwanda has consequently banned the use of plastic bags in the country and has instituted penalties, including imprisonment, for individuals caught smuggling plastic bags into the country. Given the food insecurity that women experience due to flooding and inadequate crop yields, it is prudent for South Africa to consider a similar prohibition on plastic bags.

Implementation of the Climate Change Act

While the gender-sensitive framework of the Climate Change Act is commendable in its interpretation, mitigation strategies, and adaptation procedures, the lack of enforcement poses a significant obstacle to realising its potential benefits. Therefore, it is recommended that the president establish a timeline for the operation of the Climate Change Act.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of climate change and women's rights remains an essential global topic of discourse and equally in South Africa. This paper has examined the impacts of climate change through gendered lens and concludes that women bear the brunt of climate change impacts compared to men. Inclusive policies and legislation on climate change can serve as pivotal instruments to foster gender-sensitive approaches. To promote balanced climate change adaptation strategies in South Africa, women must develop resilience against the impacts of climate change. This resilience can be enhanced through initiatives such as environmental rights education for women and girls, gender-sensitive climate change budgets, heightened public awareness of developmental opportunities linked to climate change, improved access to renewable energy sources, and the prohibition of plastic bags.

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⁷⁸ Arielle Witter, "These African Countries Are Leading the Green Climate Transformation," August 31, 2023. Accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.one.org/stories/african-countries-climate-justice-initiatives/>.

⁷⁹ Blessing, Jasmin. "Women Are Key for the Future of Climate Action in Africa," UNDP, 2022. Accessed May 24, 2025. <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/women-are-key-future-climate-action-africa#:~:text=Jasmin Blessing&text=Across the African continent%2C women,scale farming and manual labour>.

⁸⁰ Witter, "These African Countries Are Leading the Green Climate Transformation."

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