

## Gender Makes the Difference

- In 2004, the world's population reached 6.3 billion and continues to grow at a rate of 1.3 percent per year. By 2050, world population is projected to range between 7.4 billion and 10.6 billion.
- The impact of the world's 6.3 billion people on the environment is unprecedented. Humans had a negligible effect on the environment 3,000 years ago when fewer than 100 million people lived on Earth, but by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, humans have altered more than one-third of the earth's ice-free surface and threatened the existence of many plant and animal species.
- Human population growth rates in the biodiversity hotspots are higher (1.8% average) than the world on average (1.3%). This is due to both high fertility rates and people migrating into these areas. In Petén, Guatemala, forest loss with each additional person is estimated at 4-7 hectares.
- Most rural households in developing countries rely on woods for fuel, but collecting fuelwood has become a major cause of soil erosion and deforestation.
- Sanitary drinking water is becoming scarce in some areas because of expanding population numbers, pollution, and depletion of underground reserves.
- Human activity adds three million tons of oil per year to the oceans through extraction, processing, and transport, and 50 million tons of sulfur dioxide per year to the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels. These numbers could increase as economies industrialize. Currently, North Americans consume far more energy than any other region, nearly eight times that of Asians, and 15 times that of Africans.

Environmental conditions are affected by the number of people on Earth, as well as where they live and how they live. People alter the environment through their use of natural resources and the production of wastes. In turn, changes in environmental conditions can affect human health and well-being. But the consequences of environmental change and degradation do not always affect women and men in the same ways, or to the same extent.

In any community, men and women do things differently. Women and men often engage in different types of work inside and outside the home, have different levels of access to and control over resources, and have different opportunities to participate in decisions regarding natural resource use. In this context, environmental degradation often affects the health of women and men differently.

- Deforestation, scarce or contaminated water, air pollution, and disease often have a greater impact on women than men, especially by increasing the demands on women's labor and time. In most developing countries, women have primary responsibility for the collection of fuelwood and water, and for caring for sick family members.
- Because women and children spend more time inside, they are more likely to suffer adverse health effects from indoor air pollutants like soot, which is released into the air when biomass fuels (e.g., wood, charcoal, dung, crop residue, etc.) are burned for cooking and heating.



**FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC CAN BE FOUND AT:**

IUCN  
[www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)

IUCN-Gender and Environment  
[www.genderandenvironment.org](http://www.genderandenvironment.org)

Population Reference Bureau  
[www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org)

Environmental Health Project  
[www.ehproject.org](http://www.ehproject.org)

UN Population Fund  
[www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)

**SOURCES:**

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Sass, J.  
**Women, Men and Environmental Change: The Gender Dimensions of Environmental Policies and Programs.**  
Population Reference Bureau.  
Washington D.C., U.S.A. 2002.

United Nations Population Fund.  
**Footprints and Milestones: Population and Environmental Change.**  
New York, U.S.A. 2001.

- Populations in densely populated and rapidly growing megacities (10 million or more people) in developing countries are subject to levels of air pollution exposure far in excess of allowances recommended by the World Health Organization. Respiratory infections and diseases, such as asthma and lung cancer, have been linked to outside air pollution. Ailments like these often have significant impacts on a household, especially in developing countries where the gender division of labor is still pronounced. For example, asthma can make it impossible for a man to earn an income through physical labor, or can affect a woman's ability to care for her children.
- Water pollution, especially in urban settings, can be extreme, while sanitation and waste treatment are poor or non-existent. Contamination increases the time women must spend seeking safe, clean water, and increases women's risk of waterborne disease.
- Poor water quality and inadequate access to water affect women's crop and livestock production, and increase the amount of labor women must expend to collect, store, and distribute water. Women's health and the health of their families are also adversely affected. All types of waterborne diseases, especially water and vector-borne diseases, affect millions of poor each year. Women often care for those who are ill from malaria, schistosomiasis, and diarrhea, and assume the additional labor that the sick can no longer perform.
- Nutrition suffers when fuelwood shortages force households to economize on fuel by skipping meals, or by shifting to less nutritious foods that can be eaten raw or partially cooked.
- Soil erosion, water shortage, and overused soil reduce harvest yields and the productivity of household gardens. As a result, the amount of food available to the household decreases. Women and children suffer most when custom requires that they eat last and least.
- Prevalence of certain types of disease may differ between men and women depending on cultural roles or social customs. For example, in the Lushoto region of Tanzania, plague affects women more than men. One contributing factor to this differential impact is men's priority for household's beds. Women and children sleep on the ground where there is a much greater risk of coming into contact with rodents infested with plague-bearing fleas.

## **WHY GENDER MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH INITIATIVES**

- Use of less-polluting fuels such as natural gas, or adoption of fuel-efficient stoves, can reduce a woman's exposure to indoor air pollution.
- Improved sanitation and personal hygiene are two of the most effective ways to lower the prevalence of diarrheal diseases, especially in children. Hygiene behavior change has a better chance of becoming sustainable if communities, particularly women, are actively involved.
- Where women have secure land tenure and access to technical and financial resources, agricultural production increases, nutrition levels improve, and natural resources are more sustainably managed.
- When gender differences are taken into account, underlying causes of ill health can be addressed more appropriately and equitably.
- The well-being of women, men, and children and the natural environment are closely connected. Ensuring that well-being means meeting human needs without destroying the resources and natural services that sustain life on Earth.

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