

Gender assumptions harm progress on climate adaption and resilience

March 4 2021



Pursuing gender equality in climate change policy and practice is critical. Credit: Jacqui Lau.

Scientists say outdated assumptions around gender continue to hinder effective and fair policymaking and action for climate mitigation and adaptation.

Lead author of a new study, Dr. Jacqueline Lau from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University (Coral CoE at JCU) and WorldFish, said gender—alongside other identities like race, class and age—has a powerful influence on people's experience of, and resilience to, [climate change](#).

She said the four most common and interlinked assumptions found are: women are innately caring and connected to the environment; women are a homogenous and vulnerable group; gender equality is a women's issue and; gender equality is a numbers game.

"Although there is a global mandate to work towards gender equality in [climate change mitigation](#) and adaptation, efforts are hindered by a set of assumptions about gender, long critiqued in development studies," Dr. Lau said.

The study draws on post-2014 gender and [climate](#) change literature, to give an overview of how the gender assumptions manifest across recent work in adaptation, mitigation and broader climate change policy, practice and research.

The review of the literature takes a closer look at how these assumptions narrowly diagnose the causes of gender inequality.

"As a result, we see too many strategies that have unintended—and even counterproductive—consequences," said Dr. Pip Cohen, from WorldFish.

"For instance, strategies that target women only may overburden them, cause a backlash, or obscure the vulnerabilities of other groups."

The study offers lessons for a more informed pursuit of gender equality in climate change research, policy and practice.

The authors said progressing gender equality means breaking down stereotypes and prejudices about gender—creating environments to enable all people to exercise their agency to cope, change and adapt.

Dr. Lau said she was surprised to find so many examples of gender assumptions in climate change practice. She explained that a first step in disrupting these assumptions is to lay them bare and explain why development research has found them to be problematic.

"The social and cultural expectations about what it is to be a woman or a man in any given society will shape people's wellbeing," Dr. Lau said.

She said alongside efforts to dismantle broader barriers to gender equality, better and more coordinated efforts are needed from practitioners and researchers to disrupt and counteract unhelpful assumptions.

"Pursuing [gender equality](#) in climate change policy and practice is critical, and decades of experience in development offer lessons for how to do it well," Dr. Lau said.

"Ultimately, we want to see equitable opportunities for all people to realise their full potential. Where no one is left behind."

More information: Jacqueline D. Lau et al, Gender equality in climate policy and practice hindered by assumptions, *Nature Climate Change* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-021-00999-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-00999-7)

Provided by ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies

Citation: Gender assumptions harm progress on climate adaption and resilience (2021, March 4)

retrieved 8 August 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-03-gender-assumptions-climate-resilience.html>

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