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# Women and Climate Crisis in Peninsula Malaysia

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## Introduction

General Recommendation No. 37 highlights the structural challenges exacerbating gender inequities during climate disasters. Despite Malaysia's commitment to the Paris Agreement and participation in the Conference of the Parties (COP) and Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), its efforts to address the intersection of climate change and women's rights are lacking. Malaysia's sixth CEDAW report overlooks the climate crisis's disproportionate impact on women, especially those marginalised, impeding substantive equality. To adhere to CEDAW Articles 1 and 3, Malaysia must integrate strategies promoting a safe, clean, and healthy environment to advance gender equality amid climate challenges.

### **KEY ISSUE 1: Data gap and lack of evidence for gender-mainstreaming climate policies, regulations and legal mechanisms**

Addressing the intersectionality between women and climate change faces challenges due to a widening data gap. This lack of comprehensive, gender-disaggregated data impairs the understanding of the interaction between these critical areas, resulting in a **shortage of robust evidence needed to effectively integrate gender considerations into climate policies, regulations, and legal frameworks**. Current data is often fragmented and insufficient, lacking a systematic gender-disaggregated analysis that combines women's perspectives with climate disaster statistics, which hinders holistic evaluations.

Moreover, the **decentralisation** of these datasets, coupled with limited public data accessibility, poses an additional obstacle for multi-stakeholders, particularly those involved in policy making. The tendency to excessively employ the Official Secrecy Act (OSA)<sup>2</sup> restricts the sharing of data, a valuable resource for policymakers and researchers alike. Furthermore, frequent changes in key positions within Malaysia's environment ministry, due to constant restructuring, contribute to **institutional memory loss**, disrupting the progression of initiatives.

The disregard for Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples' (IP) traditional knowledge, especially that of Indigenous Women (IW) recognised as land custodians in General Recommendation 39, undermines valuable resources for policy development and innovation in addressing the triple planetary crisis. Act 134<sup>3</sup>, meant to protect Indigenous Peoples' (IP) rights, fails to safeguard those of Indigenous Women (IW) and is criticised for leaving vital matters under state government jurisdiction. While a review is scheduled for 2024, concerns remain regarding inclusivity and IW protection in the upcoming amendment. Moreover, agricultural practices of Indigenous women and rural women provide strategies for climate adaptation, such as adjusting to changes in crop yields, soil conditions, and increased pest resilience. However, these contributions are often overlooked and poorly documented.

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<sup>2</sup> [LAWS OF MALAYSIA ACT 88 Official Secrets Act 1972. \(2006\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [LAWS OF MALAYSIA ACT 134 Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 \(2006\)](#)

These gaps collectively **impede the timely advancement of effective policies and legal mechanisms in climate governance and women's rights** contrary to Article 2. This is because there is limited understanding and evidence to inform said policies on top of other logistical challenges such as financing and capacity. Notably, critical policies such as the National Policy on Climate Change<sup>4</sup> and National Women's Policy and Action Plan<sup>5</sup> have not been updated since 2009, contributing to a stagnation in progress. Additionally, Malaysia has yet to formulate a National Adaptation Plan or any national legislation on addressing climate change, with the Climate Change Bill drafting process slated to be completed by 2025. Government actions have been primarily mitigation-centric, focusing on developments such as the National Energy Transition Roadmap<sup>6</sup> (NETR) but it is essential to afford equal attention to adaptation measures. This approach is crucial for enhancing the resilience of women against the multifaceted impacts of climate change, necessitating a comprehensive consideration of the gendered impacts associated with policies regarding adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction.

As environmental and climate change policies lag, gender considerations become a secondary challenge, often marginalised under the perception of time constraints or insignificance. Consequently, a poor analysis of the gendered context of climate change and disaster policies is made, the intersectional lens is omitted, and unclear gendered targets are set leading to a lack of accountability mechanisms. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) mandates that governments engage the public through a gender-responsive approach, yet the provided response in Malaysia's 2021 revision of the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) was vague in its execution.

Streamlining policies is crucial for aligning national strategies such as the 12th Malaysian Plan with international commitments, including CEDAW and UNFCCC, to promote holistic climate governance and women's rights. Although Malaysia has begun embracing intersectionality, as shown by the Special Rapporteur's participation in the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) panel on climate change and human rights<sup>7</sup>, this effort must accelerate and integrate locally.

The Malaysian delegation's absence in gender discussions at COP28, as analysed through Malaysia's post-COP28 report<sup>8</sup>, hinders the representation of Malaysian women in all their diversity. Reciprocal engagement would enable Malaysia to learn from countries advanced in gender equality and simultaneously share insights on Malaysian women's experiences, ensuring decisions at international platforms are informed by and relevant to the Malaysian context, thus improving national gender policies.

A major issue is Malaysia's lack of gender-responsive indicators aligned with the Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG), which widens the implementation gap and limits effective guidance for engaging diverse stakeholders. **This highlights the urgent need to establish a National Gender and Climate Change Focal Point (NGCCFP)<sup>9</sup> under the LWPG, in line with Malaysia's UNFCCC commitments.** However, Malaysia has not yet appointed an individual to this pivotal role despite having a Gender Focal Point and Gender Focal Team at each of the ministries and agencies alongside the establishment of a Special

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<sup>4</sup> [National Policy on Climate Change \(2009\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [National Women's Policy and Action Plan \(2009\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [National Energy Transition Roadmap \(2003\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21

<sup>8</sup> [Malaysia's Participation in UNFCCC-COP28 \(2024\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [National Gender & Climate Change Focal Points, Unfccc.int](#)

Select Committee on Women, Children, and Community Development<sup>10</sup>. The NGCCFP, guided by the UNFCCC, must specialise in gender to effectively integrate gender considerations into climate policies and actions, facilitate collaboration across ministries and civil societies, and ensure inclusive participation in public policy formulation as per Article 7. These experts can be equipped to mobilise gender-responsive analysis, planning, programming, and accountable climate change policy implementation, budgeting, and data collection.

## **KEY ISSUE 2: Direct impacts of climate disasters on women**

### **ARTICLE 12 - HEALTHCARE**

Recent climate trends in Malaysia have been severe<sup>11</sup>. Over four weeks in 2023<sup>12</sup>, 39 cases of heat-related illnesses were reported, including heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and heat cramps, resulted in two child fatalities. The trend continues into 2024<sup>13</sup>, with 45 heat-related illnesses and two heatstroke deaths reported nationwide between March until April 13. While specific data on the gender distribution of these victims is lacking, studies suggest that women are at a higher risk of hospitalisation due to heatwaves<sup>14</sup>.

Exposure to contaminated water following floods, water pollution or environmental degradation, is a known catalyst for waterborne and vector-borne diseases according to IPCC reports. Case studies<sup>15</sup> indicate a troubling correlation between river water contamination in indigenous areas and dermatological afflictions speculatively attributed to river pollution from logging, mining and effluents from palm oil processing. Severe mental health issues among women were also noted stemming from the cumulative trauma of enduring climate disasters such as heightened anxiety, depression and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Women's concerns in crises include protecting loved ones, damage and loss of property, returning to normalcy post-disaster, and fear of sexual abuse, particularly in temporary disaster relief shelters with limited privacy. Additionally, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during environmental crises face challenges in accessing healthcare and legal assistance, compounded by the unpredictable nature of disaster relief and the presence of unfamiliar volunteers, which can increase risks. The accessibility of healthcare services has been cited as inadequate, with women facing numerous obstacles in obtaining care, including difficulties in evacuating hazardous areas, impediments to medical aid access, and loss of essential documents during disasters.

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<sup>10</sup> National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21

<sup>11</sup> [Zunaira Saieed, "Malaysia's Heatwave Expected to Last until June, with Haze Likely to Follow," The Straits Times, \(May 2023\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Santhakumar a/l Mahalingam, "Health Ministry Records 39 Heat-Related Cases," The Star, \(June 2023\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> ["45 cases of heat-related illnesses, two deaths recorded to date" The Star, \(April 2024\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Kun Hing Yong et al., "The Scorching Truth: Investigating the Impact of Heatwaves on Selangor's Elderly Hospitalisations," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 20, no. 10 \(May 2023\): 5910,](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Klima Action Malaysia, Women and Climate Change Policy Paper \(2024\)](#)

## **ARTICLE 5,11 and 12 - CAREWORK**

Traditional gender roles place women at the forefront of disease exposure as primary caregivers and leaders in disaster recovery efforts. A time-use survey revealed that on average, Malaysian women dedicate 63.6% more time to unpaid care work than men, even though they spend nearly the same amount of time as men in paid employment<sup>16</sup>. This burden intensifies during and after environmental calamities. Women are often the first to ensure the safety of their children, secure clean food and water, and manage household recovery post-disaster. This exacerbates their responsibilities, making acquiring clean water and food, particularly in rural and indigenous communities increasingly difficult. The burden escalates when women fall ill, resulting in a tripling of responsibilities as tasks accumulate or are postponed until their recovery.

## **ARTICLE 11 - EMPLOYMENT**

Women's labour force participation stands at 55.8% versus men's 80.9% in 2022<sup>17</sup>, with a slight increase over time but a growing underemployment rate among women. The climate crisis exacerbates challenges like compromised healthcare, increased care responsibilities, and halted education, violating Article 11 and impacting women's productivity and mobility in employment. Particularly vulnerable are those in part-time, daily-paid, or informal roles, facing job loss post-disaster due to rigid leave policies and inadequate social protection. Their health and well-being suffer from insufficient medical benefits and reproductive health provisions, leading to income loss when extended leaves are required. Solutions include more flexible work arrangements and better-paid leave policies, including for fathers. In extreme cases, women leave formal employment entirely, a decision influenced by the compounded demands of environmental degradation, climate-related disasters, and existing societal expectations.

## **KEY ISSUE 3: Financing women in the climate crisis**

Malaysia's 2024 national budget includes funds for disaster risk reduction and aid, yet the distribution often overlooks women, typically favouring male-headed households. This limits women's access to essential resources and financial assistance, particularly problematic in familial conflicts or polygamous settings. Single mothers especially face hurdles accessing aid due to required documents like marriage or death certificates, which may be lost or destroyed in disasters.

The lack of data-driven aid allocations and ignorance of women's specific needs such as period poverty and healthcare access leads to insufficiency, non-functionality, or superfluity among affected communities. For instance, IP families received inadequate recovery funds<sup>18</sup>, highlighting the disproportionate impacts on large households, the elderly and disabled, and those reliant on natural resources for income and livelihood. Low financial literacy and barriers such as social norms, fear, distance, and language hinder financial access for rural populations and IW, reducing their financial autonomy and increasing vulnerability to disasters. In 2016, national statistics on the financial distribution of monetary aid categorised by disaster and gender<sup>19</sup> revealed a significant disparity in the amount and frequency of aid received by women. This demonstrates that women often face barriers to accessing justice, which hinders

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<sup>16</sup> [Khazanah Research Institute, Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey \(2019\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia," Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities \(MJSSH\) 7, no. 7 \(July 2022\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Klima Action Malaysia, Women and Climate Change Policy Brief \(2024\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. \(2015\). Maklumat Bantuan Bencana Alam \[Dataset\].](#)

their ability to secure essential compensation and financial support for recovery and adaptation to climate change, violating Article 15 (1) and GR 37.

Malaysia's use of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) remains unclear for funding women-led adaptation projects or initiatives addressing gendered impacts of disaster risk reduction. International climate finance is often mitigation-centric and prioritises developing profit-making energy policies, neglecting adaptation strategies and gender considerations within those plans. This oversight in assessing the potential social impacts of financing these projects on women and grassroots communities has led to their displacement and inadequate compensation, with no legal protection against the loss of ancestral land, as evidenced in several mega dams' development projects. The Bakun dam project resulted in more than 75% of community participants being dissatisfied with consultations as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) conducted were unreliable and not reflective of their opinions. An IW leader criticizes the government's handling of the Nenggiri Dam<sup>20</sup> project, highlighting the lack of consultation with the Indigenous community and the government's misleading claims of IP broad support, despite only a few endorsements.

Malaysia's sluggish progress in implementing Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) within its national budget starkly contrasts with Article 13. The 2024 budget's lack of transparency in previous allocations hampers the development of budgets that truly reflect diverse demographic needs. Although incremental increases in care work funding are commendable, they fail to incorporate gender considerations in climate finance frameworks, highlighting the need for Gender and Climate budget Tagging in fund distribution. Moreover, specifics on how budgetary provisions, like those for the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), cater to gender responsiveness remain undisclosed. The presence of an **informal** Gender Budget Group highlights the systemic barriers still preventing equitable gender resource distribution.

#### **KEY ISSUE 4: Inequality in the participation of women in Just Transition**

Despite the government's efforts to track Just Transition in COP28, the absence of national delegation participation in gendered discussions highlights a significant oversight, missing a crucial opportunity to integrate gender considerations into climate action which takes away the 'just' from a just transition. Domestically, women hold only 30 out of 222 (13.5%) parliamentary seats, and a drop in female Cabinet representation from 17.8% to 16.1%<sup>21</sup> has further reduced their presence in decision-making roles. This is mirrored in the composition of the Malaysia Climate Change Action Council (MyCAC). Gender disparities continue in sectors like forestry, agriculture, transportation, and construction, highlighting a crucial gap in integrating climate change and gender policies, which complicates policy formulation and understanding. Women's participation in decision-making is further hindered by threats like harassment and doxing, affecting environmental defenders with variations in risk across ethnicity and socio-economic lines—IW face physical threats, while online activists deal with cyberbullying, contributing to their reduced presence.

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<sup>20</sup> [Klima Action Malaysia. Suara Nadi Belia Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia: Voices from Indigenous Youth of Peninsula Malaysia \(November 2023\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> [S. Indramalar, "Where Are the Women in Malaysia's Cabinet?," The Star, \(January 2024\)](#)

From 2021 to 2023, incidents of online sexual harassment<sup>22</sup> and court-charged physical abuse<sup>23</sup> highlight the severity of these threats. Additionally, obstacles such as language, accessibility, and care responsibilities limit women's engagement in development discussions. Ensuring that IW, not just male leaders, provide Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) to preserve cultural knowledge and address environmental and social impacts.

Malaysia's aim for net zero by 2050 may create job opportunities, but disproportionately benefits male-dominated sectors, with UN Women<sup>24</sup> estimating 80% of new jobs emerging in these fields, leaving few accessible to women. This imbalance is worsened by persistent gender stereotypes, segregation in STEM<sup>25</sup> education and careers, and discriminatory social norms that restrict women's participation in the green and blue economies. Concerns about extended maternity leave affecting women's employability further highlight the barriers to female labour force participation, despite evidence showing that higher female workforce engagement contributes to GDP growth and socio-economic progress.

Malaysia's allocation of RM 10 million for childcare improvements and social support initiatives like Single Mothers Special Assistance, Housewives Social Security Scheme and microcredit financing marks progress towards integrating climate action with care work considerations<sup>26</sup>. However, further efforts should prioritise skill development for quality, low-carbon employment and the minimisation of unpaid labour through climate-adaptive technologies and better social protection and infrastructure.

## Energy transition

A just energy transition requires overcoming current deficiencies in policy and regulatory framework towards shifting to sustainable and responsible energy. Malaysia's dependency on fossil fuels for three-quarters of its power needs poses a significant barrier to environmental sustainability and exacerbates gender inequalities. This is compounded by the nation's focus on extractivist practices in its push towards renewable energy, such as mining and large-scale hydro infrastructures. This approach conceals the detrimental effects on communities and the environment, revealing these "solutions" to be neither sustainable nor equitable, and misaligned with the goal of genuine climate action. To align with the standards and obligations set by international frameworks such as the ILO<sup>27</sup>, UNFCCC, and CEDAW, Malaysia must comprehensively reassess and evaluate its current decarbonisation strategies to avoid **false solutions** to the climate crisis.

Women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, bear the brunt of energy poverty, which exacerbates their caregiving responsibilities and limits their opportunities for education and economic

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<sup>22</sup> [Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Southeast Asia. Women's Public Testimonies in Malaysia Reveal Persisting Gaps in Gender Equality \(December 2021\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Shahrul Shahabudin. PSM activist hurt after allegedly shoved by lands and mines officer. Free Malaysia Today \(October 2024\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> [UN Women. The Climate- Care Nexus: Addressing The Link Ages Between Climate Change And Women's And Girls' Unpaid Care, Domestic And Communal Work \(2023\)](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Khazanah Research Institute. Malaysia's gender gap in STEM education and employment \(March 2023\)](#)

<sup>26</sup> National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21

<sup>27</sup> [International Labour Organization. Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all \(2015\)](#)



participation. Solar energy intermittency and costly maintenance faced by IW<sup>28</sup> in rural villages hinder access to basic infrastructure like water pumps, adversely affecting their well-being and limiting their right to clean water.

The construction of large-scale projects like the Bakun Dam has had profound socio-economic impacts, especially on IW, by displacing communities and undermining traditional livelihoods. Furthermore, the demand for rare earth minerals for renewable energy technologies poses significant risks to land rights and environmental integrity, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities.

The NETR notably omits references to women as integral participants in the transition, lacking any acknowledgement for assessments of the projects' impacts on women in communities—a concerning oversight considering existing data demonstrating the adverse effects of these initiatives. Without a gender-sensitive approach, energy transition policies risk perpetuating systemic inequities and exacerbating challenges related to energy access, care burdens, and economic empowerment for women.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Declare a climate emergency with gender-specific interventions.
2. Address gender-specific impacts of climate change by aligning national laws such as the Climate Change Bill with CEDAW.
3. Prioritise the formation and gender-responsiveness of climate policies by utilising gender policy indicators and markers.
4. Appoint and support a national UNFCCC Gender and Climate Change Focal Point under the UNFCCC Gender and Climate Change Decision 3/CP.25, paragraph 11 through a transparent and inclusive process, with clear criteria and Terms of Reference.
5. Reject false solutions and adopt economic approaches prioritising people's well-being and caregiving.
6. Implement gender-transformative sectoral policies in Just Energy Transition frameworks.
7. Recognise care work's role in green transitions and enact social protection that promotes green job opportunities for women, enhances their financial service access, boosts STEM engagement, and offers sustainable care solutions to reduce unpaid work.
8. Integrate Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, and Disability (GEDSI) in renewable energy investments, ensuring access to fair, transparent, and rights-compatible grievance mechanisms.
9. Uphold Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and ensure women's safety and participation in decision-making, increasing women's representation, especially in renewable energy and just transition decisions.
10. Formalise Gender Responsive Budgeting and focus on existing opportunities for financing gender-responsive just energy transition.

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<sup>28</sup> [Klima Action Malaysia, Suara Nadi Belia Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia: Voices from Indigenous Youth of Peninsula Malaysia \(November 2023\).](#)