

Opinion

Pakistan: There's no greater feminist cause than the climate fight - and saving each other

Sunday 26 March 2023, by [BHUTTO Fatima](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2023).

When my country, Pakistan, flooded last year, women faced particular suffering. That's true around the world

Last summer, a third of [Pakistan](#) was underwater. My country, the fifth most populous in the world, was submerged. Two million homes were destroyed, thousands of acres of agricultural land were flooded and 90% of the crops in Sindh, a food belt, were damaged. Thousands of kilometres of roads were rendered unusable, a million livestock killed, hospitals and schools obliterated, and 30 to 50 million people – a number as large as the population of Canada or Spain – were displaced and dispossessed.

It was the climate crisis that brought this nightmare to Pakistan. Pakistan has the second largest number of glaciers after the Arctic poles and thanks to global heating, they are melting at unprecedented, unmanageable speeds. Glacial melt combined with another consequence of the Earth's warming climate, erratic monsoon patterns, and together they created what was called a super-flood.

What happened in Pakistan last summer was only a teaser. The IPCC report noted that extreme weather events are “increasingly driving displacement” of people across the global south. But drought, floods and fire will come for the north, too – it is only a matter of time.

I am from Pakistan, I was born in Kabul and I am half Afghan. My grandmother was from Iran and I grew up in Damascus, Syria. I am a Muslim woman; I was born and raised across the Muslim world and Asia. There is no more urgent fight for women right now than that of climate. The crisis will affect women more than everything else in the world – more than abortion rollbacks, more than oppressive governments, more than lower pay grades. Already, [80% of people displaced](#) by the climate crisis globally are women. Climate justice is a global feminist issue. There is no greater feminist cause today than saving the planet and each other.

Water Aid, a not-for-profit organisation, estimated that while Pakistan's super-floods had been impressively democratic in the havoc they wrought, by any metric it was women who suffered the most. Nearly 700,000 pregnant women in Pakistan were deprived of maternal healthcare during the floods. They had no support for themselves and their newborns, no food, no security, no basic medical care. Miscarriages rose drastically during the floods. Besides anxiety and trauma, girls with their periods had no menstrual care, and an estimated 70% of women in flood-affected areas suffered UTIs from lack of access to bathrooms and from using dirty fabric in the place of clean pads. The climate emergency will affect the rich, the poor, the educated, the illiterate, the urban, the

rural, the beautiful, the brave, the lonely, but it will be women and girls across the global south who will bear the biggest burden.

Women and children are [14 times more likely to die during a disaster](#), according to [at least one study](#). One reason is that they are often the group with the most limited resources at hand during an emergency. But besides that, the threat of sexual violence shoots up during extreme weather events – the United Nations found that with drought in Uganda came rising rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Floods in Pakistan and cyclones in Bangladesh brought not only maternal health crises but also increased violence towards women. And yet 0.01% of global funding is spent on initiatives that touch women and climate change. I dread to think how little attention we devote to the issue.

Afghanistan, already ravaged by war and occupation, also suffered flash floods last summer. Today 95% of the country does not have enough food to eat and Afghans are facing a hunger crisis of “unparalleled proportions”, according to UN representatives. Those same representatives pointed out that almost 100% of women-led households were experiencing dire hunger.

Nancy Allen and Brian Allen stand outside the house as high winds push smoke and ash towards Nowra, New South Wales, Australia, in January 2020. Photograph: Tracey Nearmy/Reuters

Climate change is such a soft word for the horrors that await us. They called it climate change on purpose to defang it, to make it seem less frightening, less urgent a battle. Frank Lutz, the Republican strategist and pollster who advised George W Bush’s administration to move away from the more worrisome “global warming” and adopt the completely antiseptic “climate change” now concedes that he was wrong to do so, acknowledging the need for different language to address the urgency of the matter, though the damage is already done. The Guardian updated its style guide three years ago, now generally using “climate crisis”, “climate emergency” or “climate breakdown”, though in light of recent reports we need even more radical names and weapons to fight the calamity at hand. This week, the IPCC [released a “final warning”](#) on the climate crisis. The world’s leading climate scientists are urging radical and immediate action in the face of mounting greenhouse gas emissions that will end life on earth as we know it.

Soon everywhere in the world will be on fire. Or flooded. Or starving or thirsty. And if the global south is not sexy enough as a movement – after all, the climate catastrophe will not have a catchy hashtag – then there are plenty of other examples.

The fires in Australia in 2020 killed or harmed 3 billion animals. It has been called one of the worst wildlife disasters in modern history. When wildlife disappears, the world doesn’t just lose life, it is deprived of splendour and innocence. When animals are endangered, when they lose their habitats, when they come under massive physiological stress, they get sick. When they get sick, we get sick. We get pandemics. The damage is endless. This month, researchers found that the smoke from those Black Summer bushfires depleted the ozone layer by up to 5%.

For 44 years, scientists have tracked Antarctic sea ice. This month, Antarctic sea levels have dropped to the lowest levels ever recorded. And yet, while climate breakdown is bringing terrifying destruction all across the world, Saudi Aramco – the world’s largest oil company – recorded profits of \$161bn in 2022, the largest annual profit ever recorded by any oil and gas company. Its windfall rose by nearly 50%, making the Saudi-owned company more money than Shell, BP, Exxon and Chevron combined. Climate justice is not just a feminist issue, it is an existential one. It is quite literally the fight of our lives. And we are running dangerously out of time.

[As Mike Davis, the “prophet of doom”, said](#) before he died last year: “Despair is useless. What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to accept the

verdict, however all-powerful it seems. It's what ordinary people have to do. You have to love each other. You have to defend each other. You have to fight."

Fatima Bhutto

P.S.

- The Guardian. Sun 26 Mar 2023 06.00 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/26/climate-change-crisis-women-feminism-pakistan-floods>

- *Fatima Bhutto's articles on The Guardian:*
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