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Women central to efforts to deal with climate change, says new UNFPA report

LONDON, 18 November 2009—Women bear the disproportionate burden of climate change, but have so far been largely overlooked in the debate about how to address problems of rising seas, droughts, melting glaciers and extreme weather, concludes *The State of World Population 2009*, released today by UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

“Poor women in poor countries are among the hardest hit by climate change, even though they contributed the least to it,” says UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid.

The poor are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and the majority of the 1.5 billion people living on \$1 a day or less are women. The poor are more likely to depend on agriculture for a living and therefore risk going hungry or losing their livelihoods when droughts strike, rains become unpredictable and hurricanes move with unprecedented force. The poor tend to live in marginal areas, vulnerable to floods, rising seas and storms.

The report draws attention to populations in low-lying coastal areas that are vulnerable to climate change and calls on governments to plan ahead to strengthen risk reduction, preparedness and management of disasters and address the potential displacement of people.

Research cited in the report shows that women are more likely than men to die in natural disasters—including those related to extreme weather—with this gap most pronounced where incomes are low and status differences between men and women are high.

The State of World Population 2009 argues that the international community’s fight against climate change is more likely to be successful if policies, programmes and treaties take into account the needs, rights and potential of women.

The report shows that investments that empower women and girls—particularly education and health—bolster economic development and reduce poverty and have a beneficial impact on climate. Girls with more education, for example, tend to have smaller and healthier families as adults. Women with access to reproductive health services, including family planning, have lower fertility rates that contribute to slower growth in greenhouse-gas emissions in the long run.

“With the possibility of a climate catastrophe on the horizon, we cannot afford to relegate the world’s 3.4 billion women and girls to the role of victim,” Ms. Obaid says. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to have 3.4 billion agents for change?”

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UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

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