Heatwaves have intensified in cities as a result of rising global temperature, air pollution, urbanization and the impact of existing infrastructure on human settlements. The economically and socially marginalized urban residents living in informal settlements are most impacted by the rising heat.

Whether in cities or in rural areas, poor communities suffer the most from a lack of access to sustainable cooling. By 2030, 20.9% of the world’s women and girls living in extreme poverty will live in Central and Southern Asia.

As most things, the climate crisis is not “gender neutral”. Women and girls experience the greatest impacts, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety. Extreme heat is one of these climate risks.

Women are more likely to live in poverty than men, have less access to basic human rights like the ability to freely move and acquire land, and face systematic violence that escalates during periods of instability, including during heatwaves.

In informal settlements and poorer communities in Asia, women are responsible for household chores that must be carried out regardless of the weather. This exacerbates exposure to high heat during scorching weather and makes them more vulnerable to related health risks.

In combination with these factors, lack of access to important tools for heat awareness and protection limits many women’s adaptive capacity to extreme heat. Poor women also lack representation in most formal decision-making structures, meaning that their interests are often not adequately considered.
We need to take comprehensive approaches to achieve thermal comfort and do so with a gender lens on. The link between gender and cooling needs to be further strengthened with targeted research and awareness. This will help design appropriate strategies.

But women are not helpless victims. Their participation and leadership can have transformative effects in their countries and communities. They are critical to carrying out the Plan’s strategies to reduce the negative health impacts of heat and delivering sustainable cooling solutions.

From maintaining nature in cities, to the development of packhouses and cold chain technologies that can best serve their needs and priorities, solutions for women should be led by women. We need to expand direct engagement and support women-led approaches to cooling to ensure that our climate responses reverse inequalities and deliver a just transition and help build truly resilient societies.

Mainstreaming gender in interventions to fight extreme heat is therefore key to deliver social and climate justice. We need to do more to ensure that efforts in the transition to efficient, climate-friendly cooling consider and tackle gender inequalities.

We have sustainable and inclusive solutions to deliver sustainable cooling to vulnerable communities. They include integrating heat resilience into urban planning, rejuvenating, improving and increasing green and blue spaces in our cities, resurfacing our cities with heat-resistant materials, making our buildings more energy efficient, replacing old ACs with more climate-friendly ones.

Women are often the 'glue' of their communities, are key agents of engagement and change for climate adaptation efforts. Along with targeting women for outreach and education, future research and interventions should also incorporate the concerns and insights of women.

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