

# Environmental Changes and Their Impact on Women in Northeastern Syria in Terms of Health, Agriculture, and Stability

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A research paper issued by the Studies and Research Department at GAV Relief and Development Organization.



Research Author:  
**Dr. Alan Remo**



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### **Executive Summary:**

Environmental changes, alongside their subsequent social, economic, and health implications, represent a significant and growing global challenge. The exacerbating effects of prolonged droughts, rising temperatures, and various natural disasters such as storms, floods, and fires, have profound and detrimental consequences. These changes affect all individuals, particularly impacting vulnerable groups such as women.

This research explores the multifaceted effects of environmental changes on women's health in Northeastern Syria. It examines the social and economic stability of women in the region, the consequences of water scarcity, and the implications of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on their well-being. Additionally, the study delves into the pivotal role that women play in agriculture in Northeastern Syria, highlighting the intersection of environmental factors and gender-specific challenges.

## Introduction:

Climate change and environmental degradation have emerged as two of the most urgent global challenges. Once subjects of extensive debate, they have now become central to discussions on political, social, and economic issues worldwide. These environmental changes, supported by a growing body of scientific evidence, have reached a point where their existence is no longer in question. It is increasingly clear that the climate system is undergoing significant transformations, and the environment is in a continuous state of decline.

Humanity can no longer afford to ignore the risks posed by environmental changes, as their potential consequences may surpass even the most devastating wars in history. In fact, scientists have identified environmental changes as a serious threat to international peace and security. Addressing these challenges requires urgent and comprehensive action, including the formulation of new policies that account for these risks. Such measures may necessitate profound changes in our lifestyles, as well as in our patterns of production and consumption.

As the climate continues to change rapidly, the need for adaptive strategies becomes ever more critical. These efforts will be complex, costly, and demanding, but they are essential to mitigate the adverse effects of environmental degradation and ensure a more sustainable future. (Khal, 2023)

Women and girls, particularly those from marginalized and impoverished communities, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change compared to men. This disparity can be attributed to several factors, one of the primary reasons being the gender-based social roles and expectations prevalent in many Eastern societies. (Hassoun, 2021)

According to estimates by the United Nations Environment Program, women make up 80% of those displaced by climate change. This significant proportion increases their vulnerability to various forms of discrimination and violence, including sexual violence, particularly in shelters and camps where they are forced to sleep, bathe, or change clothes under inadequate conditions.

The consequences of environmental disasters, compounded by the conflicts they often trigger, make women and girls—especially migrants or refugees—particularly susceptible to forced and early marriages, as well as human trafficking. A report titled *Gender-based Violence and Its Link to the Environment*, published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, highlights numerous cases where girls were coerced into early marriages due to poverty, food insecurity, and the loss of agricultural land, often in exchange for money or livestock. (Camey et al, 2021)

### **Importance of the Research:**

Given the profound challenges posed by environmental changes and their detrimental impact on women, there is an urgent need to identify potential health risks and to better understand the social and economic consequences. This research seeks to investigate the specific effects of these environmental changes on women in Northeastern Syria, with particular emphasis on their health, agricultural roles, and social and economic stability. By addressing these critical areas, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the unique vulnerabilities women face in this region, thereby contributing to the development of targeted interventions and policies.

### **Research Methodology:**

The researcher employed a mixed-methods approach, conducting 20 questionnaires and 40 individual interviews across various regions of Northeastern Syria. The study engaged members of the local community, local authorities (Self-Administration Bodies), and civil society organizations, utilizing both face-to-face meetings and online platforms for data collection. Participants were selected from a range of social groups, including agricultural engineers, environmental activists, farmers, university professors, employees from agriculture and environmental departments, staff from agricultural and environmental organizations, doctors, and local residents. Women represented 60% of the total participants.

Once data collection was completed, the researcher analyzed the information both quantitatively and qualitatively. The data was carefully examined, verified, reorganized, archived, and stored for future reference. The analysis resulted in a comprehensive set of findings, which served as the foundation for decision-making and the development of this research.

### **Research Timeframe:**

From 2020 to 2024

### **Research Objective:**

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of environmental changes on women in Northeastern Syria, with a focus on their health, socio-economic stability, and roles within agriculture and the broader community.

### Research Topics:

#### ✓ Impact of Environmental Changes on Women's Health in Northeastern Syria

The results of the questionnaire, conducted across various regions of Northeastern Syria, revealed that 85% of participants perceived the impact of environmental changes on women's health as significantly negative. Meanwhile, 10% considered the impact to be slightly negative, and 5% believed that environmental changes had no effect on women's health (Diagram 1).

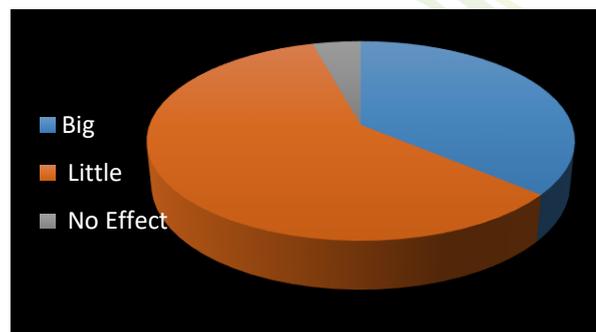


Diagram 1: Impact of Environmental Changes on Women's Health in Northeastern Syria.

Environmental changes and their resulting consequences have had a detrimental impact on women's health in Northeastern Syria, as documented by testimonies from doctors involved in surveys and personal interviews. These effects can be summarized as follows:

1. Women experience a range of physical health issues, including respiratory and skin diseases, delayed fertility, fetal deformities, miscarriages, hepatitis, and diarrhea.
2. Malnutrition, stemming from food scarcity—especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding when nutritional needs are heightened—has a negative effect on both women's health and the health of their children.
3. Rising temperatures contribute to heat stress, sunstroke, and an increase in mortality rates.
4. Women also face various psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia nervosa, and borderline personality disorder. These conditions may, in severe cases, lead to suicide.
5. There is an increase in physical and sexual violence against women in the context of ongoing conflict.
6. A study by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, titled *Gender-sensitive Climate Actions*, indicates that rising sea levels, which lead to more saline

drinking water, contribute to premature births and higher mortality rates among mothers and newborns.

In this context, Dr. Iman Issa, a gynecologist, states that environmental changes have led to the emergence of various diseases affecting women, such as high blood pressure, gestational diabetes, and fetal deformities. However, she emphasizes the lack of documented statistics on these cases and the absence of scientific studies and research addressing this issue in the region.

Halima Khalil, an administrator at the Global Education and Languages Academy in Qamishlo, notes that the academy offers training courses for women in nursing and first aid. These courses provide women with the skills to address numerous financial and health challenges, educate them in medical and health fields, and raise awareness about the importance of maintaining their health. The courses also help familiarize women with common health issues, thereby positively impacting their overall well-being. Additionally, some women have joined medical centers, where they contribute to providing essential medical services to other women, such as measuring temperature, blood pressure, and pulse, as well as administering intravenous fluids to their family members and neighbors. (Figure1)



Figure 1: Measuring Temperature, Pulse, Blood Pressure, and Needle Insertion.

### ✓ Impact of Water Scarcity on Women in Northeastern Syria

The survey results revealed that 90% of participants perceived the effects of water scarcity as negative, while 5% considered them to be positive, and 5% believed that water scarcity had no impact on women. (Diagram 2)

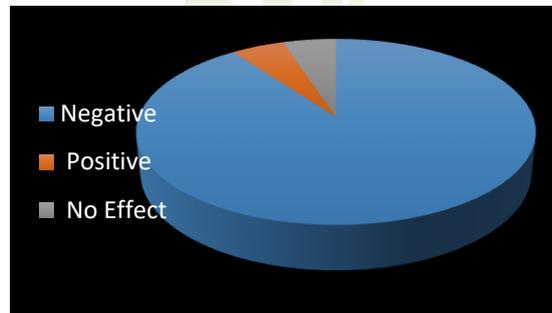


Diagram 2: Impact of Water Scarcity on Women in Northeastern Syria

Water scarcity has a significant and detrimental impact on women in Northeastern Syria, particularly in the city of Hasakah. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, millions of people in the region face intermittent water shortages. The effects of water scarcity on women can be summarized as follows:

1. **Increased Violence:** Environmental changes resulting in water scarcity lead to a shortage of resources, which increases incidents of both physical and psychological domestic violence against women. Women are often tasked with collecting water in most households, making them more vulnerable to violence during water shortages.
2. **Increased Sexual Exploitation:** The pressure of water scarcity makes women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation in exchange for access to water. Numerous testimonies from activists highlight instances where women have faced harassment, abuse, and sexual advances by men, including employees of international and local organizations, during water distribution efforts in displaced persons and refugee camps.
3. **Increased Burden and Responsibilities on Women:** The responsibility of collecting and filling water tanks usually falls on women. Many are required to travel long distances and endure significant hardship to access water sources, imposing an additional burden on them and often interfering with other essential tasks or responsibilities.
4. **Use of Contaminated Water:** Due to the lack of clean water in Hasakah and its rural areas, most residents rely on water from tanker trucks, which is often contaminated. This increases the risk of contracting waterborne diseases such as diarrhea, skin diseases, and

digestive issues. Additionally, the lack of clean water exacerbates problems related to personal hygiene, especially for women during menstruation or in the summer, leading to health complications and feelings of embarrassment and shame.

5. **Reduced Financial Income:** Many women rely on agriculture and livestock farming for their livelihoods. Water scarcity leads to reduced crop yields and harm to livestock, negatively impacting their financial stability. According to agricultural engineer Ahmed Osman, this, in turn, intensifies conflicts and disputes arising from the water shortage.

### ✓ **Role of Women in Agriculture in Northeastern Syria**

The survey results indicated that 70% of participants believe women play a significant role in agriculture, while 20% consider this role to be weak. Furthermore, 10% of participants believe that women have no role in the agricultural sector. (Diagram 3)

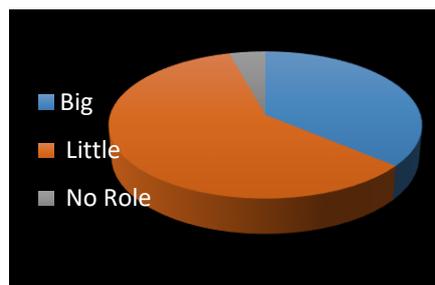


Diagram 3: Role of Women in Agriculture in Northeastern Syria.

Rural women play an essential and pivotal role in agriculture, contributing significantly to achieving food security. Their role in agriculture can be summarized as follows:

1. **Managing Agricultural Projects:** Women oversee their own agricultural projects, such as growing vegetables in greenhouses and plastic tunnels. They are responsible for managing workers and ensuring the proper care of crops from planting to production and marketing.
2. **Cultivating Field Crops:** Women work alongside their families to cultivate field crops such as wheat, barley, lentils, cumin, and coriander in open fields. They also participate in the storage of harvested crops.
3. **Raising Livestock:** Women manage livestock, including cows, sheep, goats, poultry, and honeybees, in their homes. This contributes to both food production and household income.

4. **Day Labor:** Many women work as day laborers in farmers' fields, performing essential tasks such as sowing, harvesting, weeding, and other agricultural operations.
5. **Contributing to Household Income:** Rural women contribute to the household income by selling agricultural products such as chickpeas, lentils, freekeh, as well as producing and selling dairy products, cheeses, pickles, and juices, either within the village or in local markets.
6. **Participating in Decision-Making:** Women are involved in decision-making regarding the management of agricultural resources, reflecting their significant role in promoting sustainable development at the local level.

In this regard, Leila Omar, from the villages of Taba Sibi, states that rural women have historically played a significant role in agriculture, with many excelling in this field. However, according to her, this role has noticeably declined over the past five years due to the spread of primitive oil refineries (known as "harrakat") and the pollution they cause in the villages of the Taba Sibi region. This environmental degradation has led to a decline in crop productivity and damage to livestock, prompting women to seek work in other sectors in order to secure their livelihoods. (Figures 2 and 3)



Figure 2: Oil Well in the Village of Ma'shough

Figure 3: Smoke from the Oil Refineries (Harrakat) in the Village of Al-Bashiriyah

#### ✓ **Impact of Chemical Fertilizers and Pesticides on Women in Northeastern Syria**

The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in Northeastern Syria has a negative impact on women. These adverse effects can be summarized as follows:

- 1- **Poor Quality of Fertilizers and Pesticides:** Many of the fertilizers and pesticides available in local markets are of low quality, with their active ingredients being unregulated. In some

cases, expired pesticides are sold to farmers. The repeated and indiscriminate use of these chemicals contributes to the development of resistance in pests, resulting in more frequent and severe pest infestations. This decline in crop quality and productivity ultimately reduces the financial income that women workers rely on from agricultural activities (Ramo, 2019)

**Increased Frequency of Diseases:** Research indicates that over the past five years, there has been an increase in the frequency and severity of certain fungal diseases, such as powdery mildew and downy mildew on cucurbits, as well as leaf spot diseases on barley. Notably, wheat stem rust was recorded in Hasakah for the first time, which is considered one of the most dangerous fungal diseases. These issues have led to significant losses in crop productivity, further reducing the income of women involved in agriculture. (Ramo, 2019)

- 2- **Lack of Preventive Measures:** Many women fail to adopt preventive measures while spraying chemical pesticides, such as wearing masks, gloves, goggles, overalls, and long boots. This neglect increases the risk of inhaling pesticides or having direct contact with the skin, leading to symptoms like vomiting, fainting, or poisoning.
- 3- **Impact on Reproductive Health:** Prolonged exposure to chemical pesticides and fertilizers can have a detrimental effect on women's reproductive health, increasing the risk of fertility issues and other reproductive complications.
- 4- **Reduced Productive Capacities:** The fear of health risks associated with the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has led many women to reduce their involvement in agricultural work. This results in a decreased capacity for productivity and prompts women to rely on others to secure their livelihoods.

The negative effects of chemical fertilizers and pesticides extend beyond women alone. Overuse of these chemicals increases pollution levels in soil, water, and air, and raises the concentration of toxic substances in plants, vegetables, and livestock, which are essential food sources for the local population. According to agricultural engineer Abdullah Hussein, this poses further risks to both the environment and public health.

✓ **Impact of Environmental Changes on Social and Economic Stability of Women**

The survey results revealed that 80% of participants believe the impact of environmental changes has been negative, while 5% considered the impact to be positive, and 15% believed that these changes had no effect. (Diagram 4)

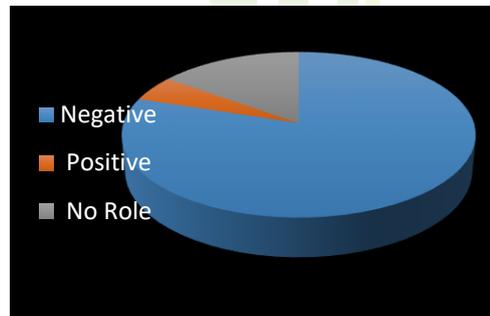


Diagram 4: The Impact of Environmental Changes on the Social and Economic Stability of Women

Environmental changes have had a negative impact on the social and economic stability of women, and these effects can be summarized as follows:

1. **Displacement and Migration:** Environmental changes and their devastating consequences have led to waves of migration and displacement from one city to another or from rural areas to urban centers. In the city of Hasakah, reasons for migration toward the city of Amuda include water scarcity, desertification, reduced vegetation cover, drought, dust storms, garbage accumulation in neighborhoods, sewage problems, and the random digging of wells. Similarly, the villages of Tirbe spiyê have experienced gradual migration toward the city of Qamishli due to air and soil pollution caused by the operation of makeshift oil refineries. Furthermore, there have been waves of migration and displacement toward Kurdistan, Iraq, Europe, and neighboring countries due to the war, deteriorating living conditions, and unprecedented levels of poverty.
2. **Change in Roles and Responsibilities:** Environmental changes have forced women to take on additional roles, such as securing water and working long hours under challenging conditions. This has restricted their ability to participate fully in social life.
3. **Increased Social Pressure:** The environmental changes and their associated challenges have resulted in a state of instability, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and social pressure on women.
4. **Impact on Social Bonds:** Ongoing displacement and conflicts related to the distribution of aid for displaced persons have disrupted social bonds, leaving women particularly

vulnerable to social isolation. This isolation has been exacerbated by the reduced community support for women's issues.

5. **Loss of Income Source:** Environmental changes have caused the deterioration of both the plant and animal agricultural sectors, forcing women to confront significant challenges in maintaining their economic stability.
6. **Increased Poverty:** The loss of income and natural resources has led to a rise in poverty, directly affecting women's livelihoods and their ability to meet basic needs.

According to Reema Murad from Qamishli, many of her friends lost their income from agriculture and livestock and were forced to migrate from their villages to the city in the past five years. This migration was driven by electricity cuts, water shortages, and the lack of essential fuels for heating and irrigation. Additionally, soil pollution has contributed to the decline in agricultural productivity.

- ✓ **The impact of armed conflict on exacerbating negative environmental effects on women in northeastern Syria.**

The armed conflict has exacerbated the negative environmental effects on women in Northeastern Syria through several interconnected mechanisms:

#### **Destruction of Infrastructure and Weakening of Essential Services:**

The ongoing fighting and destruction of vital infrastructure, including water stations, sewage systems, and healthcare facilities, have made access to clean water and necessary healthcare even more difficult. In such circumstances, women—who are often responsible for caregiving and managing household needs—are at higher risk of diseases linked to poor sanitation and pollution.

#### **Increased Economic and Social Burden:**

With displacement and the loss of income sources due to the conflict, many women are forced to take on additional tasks, such as collecting water, gathering food, and finding ways to sustain their livelihoods in deteriorating environmental conditions. This double burden not only affects the family income but also increases stress and mental pressure, which in turn negatively impacts their physical and mental health.

#### **Escalation of Violence and Social Discrimination:**

Women in conflict environments are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual exploitation. The deterioration of economic and social conditions during the conflict increases the likelihood of such incidents. Additionally, the breakdown of social structures and legal systems reduces opportunities to protect women's rights, making them more susceptible to violence and exploitation, especially in the face of environmental disasters.

### **Interference of Conflict with Environmental Adaptation Policies:**

The ongoing conflict weakens the ability of public institutions to implement effective climate adaptation policies, hindering efforts to mitigate the environmental impacts. This situation exacerbates the vulnerability of women, who often play a key role in managing natural resources and preserving the environment at both the family and community levels. As a result, women face greater risks during environmental disasters due to the lack of support and resources needed to adapt.

#### **✓ A comparison of the impact of environmental changes on women in northeastern Syria and their counterparts in Iraq**

The environmental changes in Iraq, such as rising temperatures and water scarcity, which lead to repeated extreme weather events, present significant challenges that directly and indirectly impact the health, economic stability, and social well-being of women. These challenges mirror those faced by women in northeastern Syria, where similar environmental stresses have led to profound consequences for their livelihoods and health.

In October 2021, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issued a [report](#) highlighting the severe impacts of environmental changes on Iraq's agricultural communities. The report emphasized that declining water levels in the Euphrates River and ongoing drought conditions have significantly affected food security for families reliant on agriculture in areas such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The scarcity of resources and the rising costs of agricultural inputs, including fuel, have limited the land available for cultivation and the ability to provide supplemental irrigation for crops. ([Daraj, 2023, Drought, Mines, and Denial of Women's Rights... Hope for Climate Justice in Eastern Syria](#))

In Iraq, climate change is one of the major challenges the country has faced in recent decades. According to the World Bank report of 2020, Iraq is expected to experience a rise in temperatures by 2°C by 2050, with a reduction in rainfall by up to 9%, which will exacerbate drought conditions. This phenomenon has directly impacted the livelihoods of many women, particularly in rural areas

where many families depend on agriculture and livestock. As droughts intensify and water resources diminish, many families are forced to migrate to urban areas in search of new sources of income. Statistics show that the rate of internal displacement due to drought has reached 25% in some provinces, such as Al-Muthanna and Al-Nassiriya. (*Erada Al-Jubouri, [The Impact of Climate Change on Iraqi Women: A Deepening Crisis](#)*)

According to the United Nations, the most politically and economically fragile countries, such as Iraq and Syria, are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The United Nations summarizes these risks in its latest [reports](#) through five expected scenarios:

- Climate change intensifies competition for land and water.
- Climate change impacts food production and exacerbates hunger.
- Climate change forces people to migrate.
- Climate change deepens poverty and inequality.
- Climate change increases the security risks faced by women and girls.

#### ✓ **Experiences of Organizations Successful in Mitigating the Negative Impacts of Environmental Changes on Women**

In the Middle East, various organizations have successfully worked to mitigate the negative environmental impacts on women while enhancing their adaptive capacity. Noteworthy examples of such initiatives include:

##### **Experiences in Iraq:**

- Nature Iraq Organization: This organization has been involved in projects focused on the rehabilitation of marshlands and the restoration of the natural environment. It has directly engaged women in awareness programs and provided training on sustainable farming techniques and water resource management. These initiatives have contributed to improving livelihoods and empowering women to actively participate in local environmental decision-making processes.

##### **Experiences in Egypt:**

Several local organizations in Egypt have launched projects focused on reforestation and improving water management in rural areas. These initiatives have primarily aimed at supporting women in the agricultural sector by offering workshops, training courses, and raising awareness about sustainable farming practices and resource conservation. As a result, these efforts have helped mitigate the economic and social impacts of environmental changes on women.

### **Regional Initiatives and International Partnerships:**

Organizations such as WWF Middle East and IUCN, in collaboration with local partners, have developed programs that integrate women into climate change adaptation strategies. Through these partnerships, community campaigns have been organized, focusing on the use of renewable energy technologies and the sustainable management of natural resources. These efforts aim to enhance women's resilience in addressing environmental challenges.

These experiences demonstrate that involving women in environmental decision-making and designing programs that are tailored to their local needs is a critical foundation for mitigating the impacts of environmental changes and improving economic and social stability in the face of changing climatic conditions.

## Recommendations

- Enhance environmental awareness and health education for women and communities.
- Conduct scientific studies and research on the negative impacts of environmental changes on women's health and well-being.
- Provide comprehensive healthcare services for women, with particular attention to supporting reproductive health.
- Combat gender-based violence, particularly in the context of environmental stressors and displacement.
- Ensure access to clean water for women, especially in water-scarce areas.
- Encourage women's active participation in water resource management committees and decision-making processes.
- Train women in water-efficient farming techniques to improve agricultural productivity and sustainability.
- Develop agricultural and marketing skills for women, empowering them economically.
- Promote tree planting initiatives and establish artificial forests to combat environmental degradation.
- Ensure the provision of agricultural materials and supplies for women by local authorities and organizations to support their agricultural activities.
- Support the establishment of women's agricultural cooperatives to foster collaboration and resource-sharing.
- Replace primitive oil refineries with regulated oil refineries to minimize pollution and health risks.
- Promote the use of solar panels to operate agricultural wells, reducing dependence on fuel.
- Move away from the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that harm the environment and women's health.
- Promote the use of organic fertilizers to enhance soil fertility and sustainability.
- Encourage the use of preventive and biological pest control methods to reduce the impact of harmful chemicals.
- Provide financial and credit support for women, enabling them to invest in sustainable agricultural practices and improve their livelihoods.
- Raise community awareness and provide social support for women to enhance their resilience to environmental changes.
- Improve social services and provide psychological support for women dealing with the impacts of environmental stress and displacement.

## **Conclusion**

Environmental changes in Northeastern Syria present a critical challenge that cannot be overlooked, particularly given the ongoing armed conflicts and their devastating effects on infrastructure and natural resources. With escalating environmental risks such as drought, pollution, and water scarcity, women emerge as the most vulnerable group, bearing the greatest burden of these changes on their health, social well-being, and economic stability.

However, these crises also offer an opportunity to shift toward sustainable solutions that actively involve women in the environmental adaptation process, rather than relegating them to the role of victims. In this context, the role of non-governmental organizations, local authorities, and the international community is vital in supporting sustainable environmental projects that empower women to take an active role in natural resource management and develop innovative solutions to mitigate the impacts of environmental disasters on their lives.

While this research underscores the negative impacts of environmental changes on women, it also calls for the implementation of policies and measures that enhance women's resilience to these challenges. By recognizing women as key partners, we can work towards building a more sustainable and environmentally just future.

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## About GAV:

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GAV for Relief and Development is a non-governmental, non-profit organization led by women's leadership, operating primarily in the northeastern regions of Syria. The organization also maintains a registration office in France. GAV is committed to fostering stability across various sectors, including education, food security, and health, through a variety of programs. These programs focus on providing education, building capacities, and enhancing women's participation in peace-building and stabilization activities.

Working closely with local communities, GAV supports cultural diversity, advocates against violence and extremism, and promotes shared peace and coexistence. The organization approaches these efforts from a feminist perspective, ensuring that the empowerment of women remains at the core of its mission.

