



Overview of linkages between gender and climate change

Background

“Because women often show more concern for the environment, support proenvironmental policies and vote for proenvironmental leaders, their greater involvement in politics and in nongovernmental organizations could result in environmental gains, with multiplier effects across all the Millennium Development Goals.”

UNDP Human Development Report 2011.

There is a direct relationship between gender equality, women’s empowerment and climate change. On the one hand, women are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which could, in turn, exacerbate existing gender disparities. On the other hand, women have unique knowledge and skills that can help make the response to climate change more effective and sustainable. Climate change policies that therefore take account of gender-based vulnerability and the unique contribution that women can make could help advance gender equality and women’s empowerment while fighting climate change. As the world moves toward the post-Kyoto climate regime, it is essential that climate initiatives at all levels pay particular attention to the interlinkages between gender and climate change and that women are engaged at all levels of the decision-making process.

Climate change could deepen poverty and reverse progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Although the effects of climate change on people's lives and livelihoods vary by region, necessitating the importance of in-depth local analysis, these effects, by and large, could derail progress toward sustainable development and reverse progress toward achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹ The 2011 Human Development Report (HDR) observes that global temperatures and sea levels continue to rise and the likelihood of natural disasters is increasing (the average annual number has doubled over the past 25 years). These changes and the loss of ecosystems threaten livelihoods in many countries that are ranked low on the Human Development Index (HDI).²

Moreover, these changes could exacerbate chronic environmental threats (such as deforestation, water scarcity and land degradation) that hurt the poorest the most.⁴ For example, around 350 million people (over 70 percent of whom live in Africa), mostly poor, live in or near forests on which they rely for their livelihoods. Climatic stress on forests could hurt the poor.⁵

The poor and other marginalized segments of society are especially vulnerable to climate change since their livelihoods are often highly dependent on natural resources that are sensitive to climate variability.⁶ For example, agriculture, a highly climate-sensitive sector, supports the livelihoods of 70 percent of Africans, contributes to about 30 percent of the continent's gross domestic product (GDP) and about 50 percent of the total export value, and employs 65 percent of the continent's labour force.⁷

Climate change affects men and women differently

Climate change impacts men and women differently, given their different roles and responsibilities at the household and community levels. Women are more exposed and vulnerable to climate change because they are often poorer, receive less education, and are not involved in political and household decision-making processes that affect their lives. Cultural norms related to gender sometimes limit the ability of women to make quick decisions on whether to move to safer grounds in disaster situations until it is too late.⁸

Similarly, a gendered sociocultural ethos does not encourage girls to learn skills such as swimming and tree climbing that help people to survive during floods.⁹ Additionally, women tend to possess fewer assets and depend more on natural resources for their livelihoods.¹⁰ A recent study by the World Bank indicates that 103 of 141 countries (25 of 35 economies in sub-Saharan Africa) have legal distinctions between men and women that are likely to hinder women's economic opportunities.¹¹

Empowerment of women is vital to the efficacy of climate change projects and policies

In addition to the fact that gender equality is a fundamental human right, there are other imperatives for promoting it in climate and development policy.

Climate change and the gender gap

- ↗ *Globally, only 8 percent of cabinet members and 19 percent of parliament members are women.*
- ↗ *Close to three quarters (70 percent) of those who live on less than \$1 per day are women. Women also account for three quarters of the world's 876 million illiterate adults.*
- ↗ *Women work two thirds of the world's working hours, yet receive only 10 percent of the world's income.*
- ↗ *Women own only 1 percent of the world's property. Although they predominate in world food production (50 to 80 percent), women own less than 10 percent of land.*
- ↗ *Women do not have easy and adequate access to funds to cover weather-related losses or adaptation technologies.*
- ↗ *Women face gender-based barriers to access to land, financial services, social capital and technology, which render them vulnerable to food insecurity.*
- ↗ *In Africa, the proportion of women affected by climate-related crop changes could range from 48 percent in Burkina Faso to 73 percent in the Congo.*
- ↗ *There are 2 million deaths per year (mainly women and children) related to the burning of biomass fuel indoors. About 36 percent of these deaths are in low HDI countries.*

Sources: World Bank 2011, UNDP HDR 2011, FAO 2011, Perch 2011, OECD 2008, IPCC 2007, Schalatek 2009, WHO 2011 and GCCA 2009.³

Studies demonstrate that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to development, environmental sustainability and achievement of the MDGs (see box 'Women as positive agents of change')¹² For example, a study of 25 developed and 65 developing countries revealed that countries with higher female parliamentary representation are more likely to set aside protected land areas.¹³ Likewise, enhanced participation of women is crucial in addressing the adverse impacts of climate change. For example, there is evidence that women play a vital role in dealing with disasters by effectively mobilizing communities in the different phases of the risk-management cycle; thus their greater involvement would enhance disaster risk management and reduction.¹⁵ Lack of meaningful participation by women would therefore undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of climate change projects and programmes.

Women as positive agents of change

The Niger Delta is one of the world's largest natural resource-rich areas. The region, however, has suffered from environmental and human rights abuses including oil spills, gas flaring and resulting destruction of ecosystems.

Nigerian women mobilized themselves at the community level into a social movement to protest against transnational oil companies as part of a world movement to stop the actions of these companies that led to ecological destruction. Most of the natural gas in the region was being used for gas flaring to cut maintenance costs. As a result, more gas was being burnt there than in any other part of the world, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions greater than in the entire sub-Saharan region. In 2006, these protests led to a ruling by the Nigerian courts that gas flaring violated the constitutional rights of citizens to life and dignity, and the courts ordered an end to the practice.

Sources: Anguilar, L. et al 2009.¹⁴

Although today there is a greater understanding of the need to incorporate gender perspectives into climate change policy, there are still considerable gender-based barriers across the major pillars of international and national policy processes on climate change (see box 'Climate change and the gender gap').

Recommendations for action

- **Integrate gender perspectives into mitigation and adaptation initiatives.** Investing in women as part of the climate change response leads to environmental gains and greater returns across the MDGs and broader development objectives. Decision makers and development partners at all levels need to bring women into the planning, financing and implementation of climate responses, including adaptation and mitigation, food security and agriculture, health, water and sanitation, forestry, disaster risk reduction, energy and technologies, and infrastructure.
- **Ensure that adaptive actions aim to build up the asset base of women.** As assets largely determine the extent to which people are affected by climate change and can respond to it, the adaptive capacity of women needs to be built. Moreover, pro-poor and gender-sensitive planning is needed to help them develop sustainable and resilient livelihoods.
- **Plan mitigation initiatives such that they promote poverty reduction and the empowerment of women.** Mitigation planning at all levels, including financing, needs to be pro-poor and gender conscious. The same holds true for forestry and related REDD/REDD+ activities.
- **Integrate principles of gender equality and women's empowerment into financing for climate change.**¹⁶ Gender-sensitive criteria need to be developed for all climate change financing mechanisms supporting adaptation, mitigation, capacity-building and technological cooperation.

In sum, every effort should be made to ensure that women and men contribute to and benefit equally from climate change policies, financing and implementation at all levels.

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DESIGN: Suazion, Inc. (suazion.com)

PHOTOGRAPHY: World Bank/Eric Miller (front cover) and UN Photo/John Isaac (this page)