

## Is Climate Change a Gender Issue ?

### *Why climate change is a gender issue?*

Women are particularly vulnerable to climate change because they are more prone to the adverse impacts from climate change. Their limited adaptive capacities arise from prevailing social inequalities and ascribed social and economic roles that manifest itself in differences in property rights, access to information, lack of employment and unequal access to resources. Further, changes in the climate usually impact on sectors that are traditionally associated with women, such as paddy cultivation, cotton and tea plantations, and fishing. This means increased hardship for women. For example, studies show that climate change has an adverse impact on fishing, as the sea level rises and saline water enters into freshwater systems, making fishing difficult. Further, in extreme events more women deaths are observed for women's inability to swim or run or lack of strength to withstand physically demanding situation such as storms, floods, typhoons etc.

### **Women bear a disproportionate burden of climate change consequences...**

**Decreased food security:** With changes in climate, traditional food sources become more unpredictable and scarce. This exposes women to loss of harvests, often their sole sources of food and income.

**Impact on livelihoods:** Women are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. For instance, climate change causes a rise in the sea level, affecting the fishing community (both men and women) not only in terms of fish-catch but also with regard to water scarcity, as seawater gets into fresh water. Besides, when the land is inundated, infrastructure (roads and houses) are damaged. Large scale migration from inundated areas is expected and much of the burden of migration falls on women.

**Water resources - shortage and access:** Climate change may exacerbate existing shortages of water. Women are largely responsible for water collection in their communities and are therefore more affected when the quantity of water and/or its accessibility changes.

**Increased burden of care giving:** As primary caregivers, women may see their responsibilities increase as family members suffer increased illness due to exposure to vector borne diseases such as malaria, water borne diseases such as cholera and increase in heart stress mortality.

From a long term perspective, this will have serious implications for gender relations, as women may end up spending more time on tasks that reinforce stereotypical gender roles. Thus, women are faced by a situation where their ability to adapt is low (due to a number of

pre-existing factors), but the share of the adaptation burden falling disproportionately on them. This makes the consideration of the impact of climate change on gender most imperative.

### ***What are the gender dimensions of both adaptation and mitigation?***

#### ***Adaptation***

The fundamental goal of adaptation strategies is the reduction of the vulnerabilities to climate-induced change in order to protect and enhance the livelihoods of poor people. Experience shows that vulnerability is differentiated by gender. Adaptation to climate change or indeed climate variability is dependent on issues such as wealth, technological power, access to information, all of which are major problem areas for women. However, women can be key agents of adaptation and mitigation to climate change. Their responsibilities in households, communities and as stewards of natural resources position them well to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities (WEDO, 2007).

#### ***Mitigation***

Women also have a role deriving from their own strength. Women are engaged in a number of activities such as brick-making, charcoal-making waste management and agro-processing where energy efficiency can lead to CO<sub>2</sub> mitigation and their role in mitigation in these areas can be vital. The development of Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM), through carbon sequestration from afforestation and reforestation can also be done by poor rural women (Jyoti Parikh 2003). Women in urban areas can implement energy efficiency programmes at the household level - lighting, the use of appliances etc, while women in rural areas may be encouraged to use biomass and biogas (for fuel generation), and switch to solar energy. Poor women, without access to modern energy fuels are faced with problems relating to indoor air pollution and bear huge health burdens as a result- there is a high incidence of bronchitis, asthma and other health problems. While women should not be denied the use of fossil fuels like LPG or Kerosene, yet at the same time appropriate technologies that take into account the specific socio-economic realities of different rural areas, reduce women's workload, free-up time and enable them to pursue income generating or other activities need to be developed.

### *What is the way forward?*

It is clear that gender differences **must** be taken into account to understand the impact of climate change. Gender differentiated strategies for responses and capacity- building are needed, due to differences in gender specific roles and responsibilities created by society. These findings should feed into the climate negotiations as well as national debates to enable decision-makers to have a better understanding of how different groups of people are affected and what kind of capacity and support is needed.

More specifically the following actions are required :

- **Recognise that women are more vulnerable in climate change driven scenarios :** Government should analyze and identify gender-specific impacts and protection measures related to floods, droughts, diseases, and other environmental changes and disasters. An inter-ministerial task force could be set up towards this end.
- **Understand and address gender-specific natural resource use pattern :** Government should develop strategies to enhance women's access to and control over natural resources, in order to reduce poverty, protect environmental resources, and ensure that women and poor communities can better cope with climate change.
- **Identify women's particular skills and capacities that lend themselves to mitigation and adaptation :** Given that women's knowledge and participation has been critical to the survival of entire communities in disaster situations, government should take cognizance of women's specialized skills in different aspects of their livelihood and natural resource management strategies and utilize those that lend themselves to mitigation and adaptation.
- **Increase women's participation in decision-making at all levels in climate change mitigation and adaptation :** Women's participation in climate change related debates and

planning must be enhanced by tools and procedures that augment their capacity and sensitize decision-makers to the advantages of equal participation.

*This brief is based on a draft paper " Mainstreaming Gender into Climate Change Policies" prepared by Dr. Jyoti Parikh, Director, Integrated Research and Action for Development ( IRADe), New Delhi commissioned by UNDP, India. This brief has been prepared by Nandini Oberoi.*