



Climate Change: Women in developing countries, the hardest hit

“Gender inequalities intersect with climate risks and vulnerabilities. Women’s historic disadvantages – their limited access to resources, restricted rights, and a muted voice in shaping decisions – make them highly vulnerable to climate change.”¹

Climate change is one of the most fundamental challenges facing the international community today. Already it is sabotaging the livelihoods, health and well-being of millions of the poorest people across the world, as crop yields fall and food, energy and water scarcity intensifies. There is no doubt that poor people in developing countries are bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change, risking major reversals in progress in reducing global poverty.²

With its impacts being felt most acutely by those who have done the least to contribute to the problem,³ climate change is much more than an environmental or scientific problem – it is a major development concern and a fundamental issue of global social justice. Often though, debates about climate change have focused on scientific and technical solutions. Undoubtedly necessary, these are not enough.





This brief focuses on the human and social dimensions of climate change, namely the needs and priorities of those women and men who are most affected by climate change must be at the heart of an equitable, responsive climate change agenda. It focuses particularly on the ways in which vulnerability to climate change is gendered, with women and girls disproportionately affected as a result of pervasive gender inequalities.

Box 1 – Women & climate change⁴

- 🌐 Women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters.⁵
- 🌐 The 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh killed 140,000 people – the mortality rate of women over 40 was 31 per cent.⁶
- 🌐 More than 70 per cent of the dead from the 2004 Asian tsunami were women.⁷
- 🌐 Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans, USA, in 2005, predominantly affected African American women – already the region’s poorest, most marginalized community.
- 🌐 An estimated 87 per cent of unmarried women and 100 per cent of married women lost their main source of income when Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwaddy Delta in Myanmar in 2008.⁸



Why focus on women and girls?

1. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change

Those who are already poor and marginalised experience the impacts of climate change most acutely. Unequal relationships between women and men give rise to higher rates of poverty and a more severe experience of poverty by women than men.⁹ This is due to factors such as women's economic disadvantage and dependence on men, the discrimination they face in access to and control over productive resources such as arable land, and their limited decision-making power. Higher rates of illiteracy among women and girls, and lack of access to information on climate change also exacerbate exposure to climate risk.

Disaster situations, such as Hurricanes Mitch and Katrina, or flooding in South and East Asia are increasingly being linked to climate change¹⁰ and the greater vulnerability of women is most striking. Women typically outnumber men by 14 to 1 amongst those dying from natural disasters.¹¹ For example, women and girls were recorded as comprising up to 80 percent of those who lost their lives in the 2004 Asian Tsunami.¹² Likewise, in 2007, an estimated 1.5 million people were left homeless due to rains and flooding in 18 African countries, with women and children representing more than three quarters of those displaced.¹³ A study by the London School of Economics in the UK analysed disasters in 141 countries and found that boys are likely to receive preferential





treatment in rescue efforts.¹⁴ The same study showed that in the aftermath of disasters, women and girls suffer more from shortages of food and from the lack of privacy and safety of toilet and bathing facilities, and sleeping arrangements.

Women's and girls' acute vulnerability in disasters is due to a host of gendered factors, including cultural or religious restrictions on female mobility, as well as differences in the socialisation of girls which means they may not be equipped with the same survival skills as their brothers. Women in Bangladesh did not leave their houses during floods because it was regarded as culturally inappropriate, and that those who did were unable to swim.¹⁵

It is not only in crisis situations where women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable to the consequences of a changing climate. The huge challenges of preserving livelihoods in contexts of increased climate variability and extreme weather are often felt most severely by women and girls. Because they are the main actors in the home and in the household food production (subsistence agriculture, household nutrition, water and fuel collection), they tend to be more directly reliant on natural resources and are particularly vulnerable as resources become scarce.¹⁶ In drought-prone regions affected by desertification, for example, the time for water and fuel collection increases as women and girls have little option but to travel greater distances.¹⁷ Heavy rainfalls and more frequent flooding also exacerbate women's workloads as more time and energy is expended in maintaining houses after flooding. This reduces time available for vital livelihood activities and/or engaging in income-generating activities. In poor households throughout the world, women go without food for the benefit of their children or male family members. As food prices rise, poor households tend to experience a reduction in the quality or quantity of food they are able to purchase, with women most likely to make sacrifice.¹⁸





2. Women and girls have less capacity and opportunity than men and boys to prepare for and adapt to the impacts of climate change

Gender roles and gender discrimination not only exacerbate women's and girls' exposure to climate risk, but also reduce women's capacity to accommodate their lifestyle to shifts in weather conditions. For example, for households dependent on agriculture, land is the most important productive asset¹⁹ yet in many parts of the world women are denied access to and control over land due to discriminatory laws and customs. This in turn makes it difficult for women farmers to access credit (women receive less than 10 percent of the credit granted to small farmers in Africa²⁰) and without financial resources, women farmers cannot buy the crucial inputs needed to adapt to environmental changes, such as new varieties of plant types and animal breeds intended for higher drought or heat tolerance, and new agricultural technologies.²¹

These obstacles are exacerbated by widely-held stereotypes of farmers as men – in spite of the reality that in many parts of the world it is women who are primarily responsible for growing, processing and marketing food, raising livestock, and managing vegetable gardens. These stereotypes mean that agricultural training, technologies and information are rarely available to women farmers.²² During the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, official warnings never reached the women, since they were given to men in public places and seldom communicated on to the women and the rest of the family.²³ This lack of adequate and timely information compromises women's capacity to diversify into alternative livelihoods or increases their resilience.





3. Climate change worsens gender inequalities

The particular effects of climate change will have long-term consequences for gender equality. It reinforces unequal access to wealth, new technologies, education, information and assets such as land, which are critical to cope with changes in climate.²⁴ There is also a risk that as water, energy and food shortages increase, women's and girls' time-consuming domestic work in the home grows and limit their time to engage in work or education outside the home, or in community activities.

Research by Plan UK in Ethiopia showed, for example, that as water sources are being depleted by prolonged droughts, environmental degradation and population growth, girls are spending greater time collecting water for drinking, cooking and washing for the household.²⁶ Girls interviewed in the Lalibela district of Ethiopia reported the time they spent fetching water increased substantially each day during drought periods. Fetching water could take up to six hours a day, whereas previously it had taken around two hours²⁷. This makes it increasingly difficult for girls to go or remain and succeed in school. This place women are greater risk of violence as sexual assault on women occur outside their home, while fetching water or cultivating crops – now if they have to walk longer, their safety is more a risk.

Box 2 – Poor Women's Adaptation Priorities²⁵

- 🌐 A safe place to live:
 - Relocation of communities to safer areas
 - Solid houses built with a high plinth level to reduce inundation
 - Shelters required for people, animals and agricultural inputs/ products
- 🌐 Better access:
 - To climate change information and related knowledge and skills
 - To services, such as doctors and veterinaries
 - To safe, reasonable and fair credit and insurance
 - To communications, through safer roads and access to boats
- 🌐 Other livelihood options:
 - Through knowledge and resources for crop diversification and adaptive agricultural practices
 - Through access to irrigation
 - Through locally available training.



4. Women and girls – Change agents in climate change response

Women and men have distinct and valuable knowledge about how to adapt to the adverse impacts of environmental degradation²⁸ and as the most affected, they should be at the centre of framing solutions that are appropriate to poor people's realities.²⁹ Innovative responses to climate change are already in place at the community level, often spearheaded by women who have a great deal of experience of coping with the impacts of climate change in their own communities.³⁰

Research with women in rural communities in the Ganga river basin in Bangladesh, India and Nepal described various adaptation strategies such as changing cultivation to flood and drought resistant crops, or to crops that can be harvested before the flood season, or to varieties of rice that grow high enough to remain above the water when the floods come.³¹ "As we never know when the rain will come, we had to change. I started to change the way I prepare the seedbed so that we don't lose all our crops. I am also using different crops depending on the situation"³² Similarly in Mali, women involved in farming have also experienced a new crop that can stand adverse weather conditions: they are now growing nut bushes. The bushes can be used as firewood; the nuts are ground to a cream and sold to be used for beauty products.

In addition to crop diversification, some specific priorities were articulated by women in the Ganga river basin to adapt to the floods (see box – 2)



Box 3 - Women need an equal voice in decision-making

In the Kilombero District of Tanzania, a well built by a non-governmental organisation dried up shortly after it was created. It was revealed that the location of the well had been decided by an all-male local committee. When development workers talked to the local women they discovered that it is the women's task to dig for water by hand so they know the places that provide the best water yields. Since the incident, the women have had more involvement in decisions about the location of wells. Fisher 2006

Clearly women and girls have important knowledge and insights to contribute to climate change responses. Despite this, representation of women and girls in climate change negotiations has remained very low. At the 16th Conference of the Parties in 2010, women made up only 30 per cent of all delegation parties and between 12-15 percent of all heads of delegations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the overarching international framework for addressing climate change agreed in 1992³³. There are also numerous examples of cases where women have not been consulted in the design and planning of community water or agricultural initiatives³⁴ Lack of opportunity to feed into climate responses can jeopardise the effectiveness of such initiatives (see box 3)



Ways forward – towards an equitable, responsive climate change agenda

There has been a dramatic rise in international funds for programmes to tackle climate change and its impacts in recognition of the serious challenge climate change poses to global poverty eradication. For funds to be effective and make a real difference to the lives of the world's poorest people exposed to climate change, particularly women and girls:

1. Donor programmes and policies must systematically integrate a gender analysis to understand the gender inequalities in a given context and how climate changes will contribute to exacerbating these inequalities.
2. Women's voices must be at the centre of climate change response. Donors' planning must recognise and draw on local women's knowledge in developing accommodation strategies and female participation in all areas of decision-making (nationally and internationally) must be increased (see box 4).
3. Ensuring emergency provision takes into account women's vulnerabilities, including ensuring that warning systems reach all members of the community, and shelters take into account the needs of women (see box – 5)
4. Continue to addressing the health and nutritional inequalities which make women most vulnerable to climate change, as well as addressing their disadvantage in accessing up-to-date information about climate change and adaptation strategies.
5. Northern countries must commit more radical cuts in greenhouse emissions beyond 2012, when the first commitments to Kyoto expire, to limit the negative effects climate change has, particularly on women.
6. Northern countries must organise societies in ways that does not cause climate change and is inspired by men and women living more sustainable living, amongst other by reducing consumerism and a move towards an economy less focussed on growth and more on meeting people's needs and supporting alternative energies.



Box 4 Women in Climate Change Negotiations

At the international level, innovative work has taken place to increase women's voice in climate change negotiation processes, for in 2009, Finland provided 500,000 euros in travel and DSA to support the participation of women from developing countries to the UN Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen (COP-15) and to events building up to COP-15.³⁵

Box 5 – Aftermath of Mitch Hurricane in Honduras

In La Masica, Honduras, for example, there were no reported fatalities after Hurricane Mitch, in part because a disaster agency provided gender-sensitive training and involved women and men equally in hazard management activities which helped ensure a quick evacuation when the hurricane struck.³⁶ In the aftermath of disasters, positive approaches have included working with women and girls in emergency shelters and camps to protect them from heightened levels of gender-based violence. Such efforts may involve lighting the way to the toilets or finding people who are willing to monitor the route or accompany women and children.³⁷



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KARAT Coalition

Since 1997, KARAT has been running a network of women's NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) aimed to ensure gender equality through monitoring the implementation of international agreements and policies. It advocates for women's human rights, economic social justice and gender-focused development cooperation with a strong focus on the perspective from CEE and CIS. KARAT has built up a strong network over the past decade and is currently composed by approximately 60 members.

Koalicja KARAT

ul. Rakowiecka 39A/14,
02-521 Warszawa
Tel. +48 22 849 16 47,
tel./fax +48 22 628 20 03
secretariat@karat.org.pl ;
www.karat.org



One World Action (OWA)

OWA was a civil society organization established in 1989 to work alongside rural and urban women's organizations and networks across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Through capacity-building, networking and advocacy, it worked on issues such as women's rights, participatory governance and social exclusion. It was advocating and campaigning in the UK and Europe to challenge international policies to make and keep people poor. OWA has ceased operations and it closed its office in September 2011.

One World Action

Bradleys Close, White Lion Street,
London N1 9PF United Kingdom
Tel: + 44 (0)20 7833 4075,
Fax: + 44 (0)20 7833 4102
info@oneworldaction.org ;
www.oneworldaction.org
Charity registration number: 1022298;
Company registration number: 2822893



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