

What it means for women

Women's Environment and Development Organization

Although climate change affects everyone, it is not gender neutral.

Climate change magnifies existing inequalities, reinforcing the disparity between women and men in their vulnerability to and capability to cope with climate change. During natural disasters, more women tend to die or suffer injury than men because they are not warned, cannot swim or cannot leave the house alone. When poor women lose their livelihoods, they slip deeper into poverty and the inequality and marginalisation they suffer from because of their gender increases.

Women's responsibilities in the family make them more vulnerable to environmental change, which is exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. As access to basic needs and natural resources – such as shelter, food, fertile land, water and fuel – is hampered, women's workload increases. Drought, deforestation and erratic rainfall mean that women have to work harder to secure resources and livelihoods. In such situations, women have less time to earn income, get an education or training, or to participate in governing bodies. Girls regularly drop out of school to help their mothers to gather wood and water.

The relocation of people severely impacts on social support networks and family ties – mechanisms that have a crucial value for women and on their coping capacity.

Women, however, can also be positive agents of change and contributors to livelihood adaptation strategies, and natural disasters can provide women with a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society. Local strategies for adapting to climate change provide valuable lessons. In studies from areas where flooding was problematic, women's adaptation strategies and mechanisms included:

- moving to safer places: higher locations, temporary shelters, increasing the

- plinth level of their houses or homesteads, and migration
- saving their assets: trying to store seeds and moving livestock to higher places
- dietary adaptations: skipping meals or eating non-traditional foods
- preserving food to be used in lean times
- using alternative energy-related technologies
- adapting agricultural practices: e.g. switching to crops and/or varieties that are flood- or drought-resistant, multiple cropping and inter-cropping practices, alternative irrigation facilities, changing to more easily marketable crop varieties or to other animals
- earning income as labourers, borrowing money from money lenders, saving part of their earnings, or selling livestock
- organising and collective action: e.g. setting up of group savings or systems of group labour.

Environmental issues, including policies, laws and programmes, are often treated as being gender neutral. Whereas there is clear evidence of a direct link between gender relations and impacts of and adaptation to climate change, women's participation in decision-making structures and processes is still inadequate. Climate change debates, processes and mechanisms at national level often fail to sufficiently adopt a gender-sensitive strategy, and there is little evidence of specific efforts to target women in adaptation activities funded by bilateral and multilateral programmes.

A broader evaluation of women's vulnerability to climate change can be achieved through the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs)¹ and by estimating the degree of vulnerability to natural risks. Many NAPAs emphasise the vulnerability of women and the importance of gender equality in broad terms. However, few describe

how women are affected by climate change, much less how they might be identified as powerful actors and agents of change. Prioritised activities in many NAPAs fail to include women as contributors and target groups.

Where NAPAs do take gender aspects into consideration, substantial work still has to be done to mainstream gender in climate change policies. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)² and Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSPs)³ could serve as important reference documents in that respect. Civil society groups can play an important role in support of marginalised groups and in addressing equity considerations – and therefore are significant in strengthening gender responsiveness in climate change, enhancing human security.

Greater inclusion of women and inclusion of a gender-specific approach in climate change adaptation and decision-making may reverse the inequitable distribution of climate change impacts. And greater inclusion could improve adaptive decision-making itself, reducing the negative impacts on the entire community, thus enhancing human security.

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1. http://unfccc.int/national_reports/napa/items/2719.php
 2. www.un.org/millenniumgoals/
 3. www.imf.org/external/NP/prsp/prsp.asp