



'An overview of women, gender and climate change issues'

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Climate change is today recognized as a major global challenge and is, as such, much discussed at international level. Two recent global conferences have been held on the subject - in Denmark (2009) and in Mexico (2010). Climate change – and its important gender equality perspectives - is an issue which clearly should be on the educational agenda. Some thought is required on the context and methodology for approaching what is, sometimes, a rather controversial issue. My introductory presentation aims to provide a global overview of gender equality issues in relation to climate change from a developing countries perspective. The following presentation, Perla Bunda's presentation on the Asia Pacific region, will provide more concrete details.

Over the past decade, efforts have been made to include women's perspectives and give attention to gender equality aspects in relation to the causes and impacts of climate change as well as to global and national strategies to address its consequences and work more effectively to prevent climate change. These efforts have met with many difficulties at all levels – global, regional and national/local. At global level we see today for example that, despite efforts made, gender equality issues are not included in global negotiations and in important outcomes, such as the Kyoto Protocol and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

One of the reasons for this can be that many climate change experts still view climate change from a largely physical/technical perspective and are not knowledgeable about or particularly interested in critical social aspects, let alone gender equality aspects. It is not uncommon that gender equality experts and advocates in the United Nations, at national level and in NGOs, face an attitude that was widespread in the 1970s – the perception that raising women's perspectives and gender equality issues is a distraction from the important work at hand. Colleagues have been told "Don't disturb our important planning work. Come back when we have finished this critical phase and then we can discuss gender issues."

Such an approach would, of course, defeat the whole purpose of the efforts being made to ensure that relevant issues are identified and addressed from initial stages of and throughout negotiation processes and project planning processes on climate change. Coming in at the initial stage is critical for ensuring that all processes are gender-sensitive – i.e. take into account what both women and men do, contribute, need and prioritize in relation to natural resource management and climate change processes. The critical processes which must be influenced from a gender equality



perspective include research and data collection, development of protocols and conventions, policy and strategy development, resource allocations, development of programmes and activities for mitigation and adaptation, and provision of training and other supportive inputs, such as access to appropriate technology.

Gender equality work in many areas over the past few decades has often been met with scepticism and resistance. To move forward in the area of climate change, it is important to identify strategies that have worked in the past and can be applied to climate change, as well as to develop new innovative ways to bring attention to the importance of gender equality issues in developing effective ways to prevent and address climate change.

Use available international instruments and processes

The United Nations has given some attention to gender equality and climate change in recent years and provided concrete recommendations for action. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), for example, discussed the issue of climate change in its annual sessions in 2002 and 2008. In 2002, climate change was mentioned as part of the focus on the theme: Women and the environment. Climate change was identified as the 'Emerging Issue' theme for the Commission in 2008. The Commission made the point strongly that climate change cannot be considered 'gender neutral' as is sometimes claimed. It pointed to the vulnerability of women in many parts of the world to the effects of climate change as a result of their critical roles and responsibilities, in particular for food crop production, and their reliance on natural resources in their livelihood strategies. It highlighted the situation of rural women and the particular vulnerability of indigenous women. The Commission pointed to the negative effects of only seeing women as victims and excluding them from planning and decision-making processes in relation to natural resource management, and it called for their full inclusion in all information and training programmes.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also given considerable attention to developing recommendations and calls for action on gender equality and climate change. The Third Congress on Women and Politics/Governance in 2008, for example, adopted the *Manila Declaration on Gender Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction*. It highlighted that women are important agents of change with considerable relevant knowledge; acknowledged women's leadership roles in communities; and called for support for women's initiatives at grassroots level.

All the available processes and instruments on climate change at global, regional and national levels, must be effectively utilized to bring more attention to women's perspectives and gender equality issues on climate change at global, regional, national and local levels.

Develop knowledge of the interaction between women and climate change

To address climate change effectively it is important to increase knowledge of the particular vulnerabilities of women in different circumstances as well as the critical role women play as 'agents



of change' in addressing climate change. I will provide a brief overview of the situation in many developing countries today.

Women are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change precisely because they play such a critical role in management of natural resources, as a result of their responsibilities for household livelihood. Women's major role in agriculture, in particular food crop production, is critical for household food security. They take the major responsibility for provision of water and energy (firewood, charcoal, crop residue or dung) for the household – responsibilities which are usually carried out without access to adequate technology and transport and entail a huge work burden and long hours of travel by foot. Women's income generating activities are essential for household survival - for purchase of items which they cannot grow or produce themselves - and many of these activities are dependent on adequate supplies of natural resources – including activities such as vegetable-growing, chicken raising, brick-making, fish smoking and beer-brewing.

Both major catastrophes such as droughts and cyclones and changes which are less dramatic, such as erratic rainfall, minor flooding and spread of pests can have a serious impact on household livelihoods. Cumulative changes leading to deforestation, desertification and loss of wetlands can be devastating for women's livelihood security, and the survival of their families. Women in many parts of the world struggle to grow sufficient food crops and ensure a consistent supply of water and energy for their families as a result of the impacts of climate change. They often have to walk much further to collect water and firewood or other fuel types and this reduces the time and energy available for food crop production and other essential income-generating activities.

Because women's work burdens increase significantly as a result of climate change, they have to forego opportunities that are important for their economic empowerment, such as education/training and income-generating activities. In some cases, they are forced to take their daughters from school to assist them with work on the farm or in the household. This has long-term detrimental effects on the empowerment of these girls.

Efforts to address climate change, even at local grassroots level, tend to neglect and ignore rural women. Most processes are gender-blind and gender analysis – that is, analysis of the roles, contributions, priorities and needs of both women and men – is not carried out before decisions are made and resources are allocated. Women are not consulted and they do not participate in decision-making on these important processes that affect their lives directly. Climate change adaptation and mitigation programmes often include information and training and can involve the development of new skills and provision of new technologies and resources. In some cases, new employment opportunities can be opened up. Access to information and new skills, technologies and income-generating opportunities could increase women's potential to fulfil their important roles and responsibilities. It could also help combat gender stereotypes about what women and men can and should do, and could raise the status of women in rural areas which would have long-term positive impacts on families and communities.

A major problem in many efforts on climate change is the tendency to treat women solely as vulnerable and as victims. Women are powerful agents of change in their families and communities. They can and do take strong action to prevent and address climate change. They can be powerful leaders and catalysts for change at community level – particularly when they receive adequate information, resources and roles in decision-making. Already in the 1970s, before climate change



became a widely-known problem, women were leading the way in Africa in small-scale plant nurseries. In Tanzania, for example, women formed groups and jointly raised seedlings for their own use and for sale, despite the fact that this entailed a significant extra burden over and above their heavy workload. In other cases, forestry officials directed their reforestation efforts at community level to women because they knew that women were more reliable over the long-term in initiatives which required work inputs.

Understand the inter-linkages between climate change, other crises such as the food and energy crises, and climate-related natural disasters

Because of women's critical roles in food crop production, they are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the food crisis. Their unequal access to resources - such as land, technology, extension services and credit - limits their capacity to adapt to deteriorating conditions and to ensure food security for their families. It is becoming increasingly evident that unless the challenges faced by women in agriculture are recognized and addressed, the food crisis will not be adequately addressed in the short or long-term.

The energy crisis impacts on the economic activity of rural women by making food more expensive and agriculture less profitable. Agriculture remains a burdensome and inefficient activity for women in many parts of the world because of lack of access to modern bio fuels. Increased access to biofuels could reduce work in agriculture and income-generating activities and provide needed community services and facilities, such as improved water supplies and grain mills. These seemingly positive initiatives, could, however, also have negative impacts on women's agricultural production and on food security if careful analysis of the existing situation is not carried out before decision are taken. If, for example, common property resources, such as 'commons' or 'wastelands', are appropriated for production of biofuels, women may lose essential access to food, fuel, fodder for small animals, and medicine. If land traditionally used by women for food crop production is converted for biofuel production, women's food crop production may be pushed out into more marginal and less productive land which would impact negatively on food security.

Increasing demands for biofuels and programmes to address the energy crisis can create new employment and income-generating opportunities. Because of existing inequalities women may, however, not be able to fully benefit from these opportunities, particularly if a focus on large-scale production requires access to resources women do not have easy access to, such as land, water, fertilizer and pesticides.

There are an increasing number of climate-related natural disasters – including major disasters such as hurricanes, cyclones, severe droughts and flooding and more minor, recurrent conditions with negative impacts over time, such as soil erosion, soil degradation, rising sea levels, and salt intrusion. The costs of these disasters are not distributed evenly over the population. Poverty plays a major role in susceptibility to the impacts of disasters, as a result of poor housing conditions, vulnerable location of homes and farms, limited access to information and resource constraints which hinder the adoption of more long-term adaptation and mitigation strategies.



Within the poor, certain groups are more vulnerable – in particular those who are especially resource-poor and who are less able to put forward their priorities and needs and who are not consulted or involved in decision-making. *Direct impacts on rural women in developing countries may also disproportionately large because of particular vulnerabilities* – this includes impractical dress codes, poor physical condition, sometimes because of restrictions on their mobility, and lack of relevant skills such as swimming and tree-climbing. Long-term consequences include increased economic insecurity as a result of loss of lands, gardens, small livestock and equipment. Women may also lose traditional forms of capital such as jewellery. Their loss of income-generation opportunities may not be noted in assessments of recovery needs, particularly if they worked in the informal sector. As a result, they may not be compensated or supported to find other means of generating income. Rural women's work – in both on- and off-farm activities, may not be counted and taken into account in recovery programmes.

Women's workloads can increase as a result of climate-related disasters. Food security becomes more problematic and women's agricultural work can become more burdensome. Care-giving roles can also increase – taking care of the injured as well as the young, elderly, sick and disabled in difficult post-disaster conditions can involve significant extra work for women and girls. Reduced access to water and fuel for cooking may increase women's workloads. Access to other essential items can become more difficult and long queue time may be required. This often means that women have to take their daughters out of school to assist them to cope with the extra burdens imposed by disasters and their aftermath. In some post-disaster contexts, men migrate in search of work leaving women in rural areas to cope with the aftermath of the disaster. In many contexts women and girls become more vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation, for example when they have to walk long distances to find water and firewood.

Even though the disproportionate impact of disasters on women is relatively well documented, *emergency response and immediate recovery programmes* still tend to neglect women's situation. Many programmes are gender-insensitive as they overlook the contributions, priorities and needs of women. They may neglect the household level, the subsistence sector and the informal sector where most women are located, even though women's inputs are essential for household economic recovery.

In the move from short-term humanitarian assistance to *more long-term development support*, it is critical to include specific attention to women's economic contributions if these efforts are to be successful. Women's inputs to rural development are essential for both recovery and future development. Women are, however, among the poorest of the poor in many rural areas and lack financial and human resources, especially female-headed households. A right-based approach is required to ensure that women's political, economic and social rights are not violated in recovery efforts, and that they have equitable access to information, resources and decision-making opportunities. Post-disaster contexts can offer opportunities for women's economic empowerment if care is taken to ensure that they have equitable access to new resources – including training, skills, and technologies.

At the level of *risk-assessment and risk management*, and in efforts to avoid climate-related disasters, very little attention has been given to women and gender equality issues. Effective risk assessment and management requires the involvement of local communities in actions to decrease



occurrence of disasters and to reduce losses/costs when disasters occur. The knowledge and capacities of both women and men are required for successful programmes. When women are not consulted and involved, and their situations - roles, constraints, and priorities/needs – are not taken into account, their potential to make a positive contribution is reduced. Risk assessment and management interventions which ignore women's roles and contributions can never be fully successful. Early warning systems and preventive measures must give much more attention to social contexts and to gender perspectives in particular.

There is a serious lack of knowledge of women's critical inputs in agriculture and natural resource management, which leads to inequalities in access to information and resources, and lowers the efficiency and effectiveness of women's contributions. Improving the gender sensitivity and effectiveness of risk assessment and management requires greater understanding of women's and men's different use and management of natural resources and the ways in which these are linked to risks for climate-related disasters. Knowledge of the resources and other constraints faced by women is also essential for ensuring women's full participation and contribution. In some contexts, even if women are consulted and provided with information and opportunities for participation, they may need additional support to compensate their lack of capital, to assist them in overcoming stereotypes, and to address their time constraints.

Understanding the linkages with education and the role of the educational system

A number of direct impacts of climate change and climate-related disasters on girls' education have already been raised. Women's increased workloads as a result of climate change leads to the removal of girls from school to provide needed support. Increased care-giving, limited access to essential services and goods, and problems in securing food, water and fuel in post-disaster contexts, also results in girls being taken from school to support their mothers. This has long-term negative impacts on girls' education and future employment and economic security. Schools need to take these situations into account and to provide flexible schedules to allow these girls to continue their education – offering if necessary shorter school days and/or evening classes.

The vulnerability of women and girls to the impacts of climate-related disasters – for example, the fact that many women and girls die because they are in poor physical condition and cannot swim or climb trees - need to be understood and addressed by schools. Information on specific risks, for example of long hair being caught in trees during flooding, must be provided. Where tradition requires women to have long hair, rubber swimming caps can be provided through schools. Swimming lessons and physical education programmes should be offered in risk areas to both girls and their mothers.

Educational programmes on climate change should be gender-sensitive –i.e. take into account women's critical role in natural resource management and their contributions to household food security and maintenance, and ensure balanced information is provided to students. Women's vulnerability to the impact of climate change should be noted but there should be a strong focus on women's critical roles as agents of change and the need for their contributions in risk assessment and prevention and in emergency and long-term development responses.