Linkages Between Climate Change and Women

Climate change analysis has so far been science–driven, presented in terms of greenhouse gases and emissions. While the scientific analyses remain crucial, social imperatives must be taken into account. Although there are no obvious direct linkages between climate change and women, its potential impacts in terms of socio-economic vulnerability and adaptation place women in a key position.

The notion of gendered impacts of climate change may be perceived by cynics as yet another attempt at academic babble; a systematic attempt at gender mainstreaming in key development policies. After all, climate change is a phenomenon of our times that may alter the lives of humankind in general. Just as hurricanes, storms and floods strike indiscriminately, so too will the consequences of climate change. So, what gender differences could be expected?

The release of greenhouse gases through human activities is creating a thick blanket in the atmosphere, bringing about global warming and hence climate change. Carbon dioxide is one of the most important of these gases and its release is mainly caused by the use of fossil fuels and by deforestation.

As we consider along this bulletin, women who live in or depend on the forest are already being affected by processes which destroy or degrade it: logging, mining, oil, dams, expansion of agriculture, plantations, shrimp farming. These processes in turn contribute to climate change (through the release of carbon dioxide and methane), while changes in the climate will further degrade forests, thereby accelerating the release of carbon dioxide. This means that women already impacted by deforestation would suffer the additional impacts of climate change.

Physical impacts such as rising sea levels, increasing salt-water intrusion, and intruding into human settlements will dramatically alter the natural balance of local and global ecosystems. The problem of rising sea levels is crucial, especially in terms of small islands and low-lying areas. These areas are inhabited by a significant percentage of the human population whose main sustenance comes from their natural habitat. Water contamination of ground water by seawater would also occur in low-lying deltas. Women involved directly or indirectly (as fish traders) will see their income fall significantly. Climate change impacts could give rise to job losses and an increase in the price of fish leading to social upheaval.

In their quest for remunerative activities, women may be unable to adapt to the vagaries of the weather and their remunerative activities could be severely disrupted. Also, many women are responsible for the cultivation and production of agricultural crops. Climate change may worsen agricultural production and, consequently, exacerbate food insecurity. Women who are centre stage in the food chain, in production and in distribution already have to contend with environmental stress such as cultivating arid land, and climate change will exacerbate the situation.

Climate change may also heighten the problem of human migration. Natural catastrophes such as floods and storms could result in severe infrastructural damage on the coast and lead to population

displacement. Worldwide, 150 million people will become homeless due to coastal flooding, agricultural disruption and shoreline erosion. Because women are key actors in maintaining the social cohesion of the family, this possible impact of environmental degradation could be very destabilising. Migration and environmental change could also trigger economic and social instability.

Climate change is predicted to cause serious health problems related to cardiovascular, respiratory and other diseases. Also women and children may be exposed to greater water-related health risks since they are responsible for drawing water and have to contend with unhygienic and unsanitary conditions.

Women constitute the majority of low-income earners. Perpetually imprisoned in cycles of dependency and co-dependent roles, women have to strive to maintain the household and its nutritional needs. Defining poverty is not easy, yet indicators such as per capita income, access to credit, ownership of assets, differential access to land rights, life expectancy, education, all put women in an unfavourable position in comparison to their male counterparts. In addition, because poor people and poor women specifically tend to have isolated lives, they find themselves marginalized and do not figure in poverty indicator analyses. Climate change is predicated to accentuate the gaps between the world's rich and poor, and women are among the poorest and most disadvantaged. They often develop adaptive strategies, yet the nature and scale of environmental stress is such that it may overwhelm women's ability to contribute effectively to socio-economic development. Climate change related hazards could mean a loss of revenue for women in agriculture, industry, fisheries and also in the informal sector.

Climate change is simply a much graver example of the complexity of environmental stress and how it could affect women, who have a multi-dimensional role as mothers, providers, carers and often natural resource managers.

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