

Changing the Climate: Why Gender Equality Matters

By Rebecca Pearl, Women's Environment and Development Organization

Climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our time. Extreme weather and natural disasters have become more common and the results are all too real: devastating drought and floods in Africa and Asia, a deadly European heat wave, and the wreckage of hurricanes in the Americas.

Unquestionably, climate change will affect everyone. However, climate change magnifies existing inequalities, and gender inequality is among the most pervasive forms of inequality. Women's historic disadvantages – their restricted access to resources and information, and their limited power in decision-making – make them more vulnerable to extreme weather events. At the same time, women are best positioned to curb the effects of climate change.

Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that even in industrialized countries poor women are disproportionately affected by swift environmental changes. African-American women are among the most impoverished groups in the United States, and the hurricane further entrenched this group in deeper levels of poverty. Poor women in developing countries face even greater obstacles. During the Indian Ocean tsunami at the end of 2004, women made up 55 to 70 percent of the dead in Banda Aceh, and 80 percent of the dead in the worst affected village in Indonesia. Similarly, during the 2003 European heat wave, 70 percent of the dead were women.

Natural disasters often reinforce traditional gender roles. Women living in rural areas of developing countries are still largely responsible for securing food, water and energy for cooking and heating. Drought, desertification and erratic rainfall cause women to work harder to secure these resources. This results in less time to earn income, get an education and provide care to families. Women usually have fewer assets than men to recover from natural disasters, and they often do not own land that can be sold to secure income in an emergency.

Many of the world's conflicts are spurred by threats to natural resources. Climate change will likely increase these conflicts, and thus the gender inequalities that come along with them. In the Darfur region of Sudan, where desertification has plagued the land in recent decades, homes are often destroyed, campaigns of intimidation, rape, or abduction are waged, and thousands of women and children are caught in the crossfire. Conflict increases migration, and the vast majority of the world's refugees are women and children.

While women are faced with unique vulnerabilities, they are seldom recognized as agents of change. In a growing number of studies of natural disasters, putting women at the center of early warning systems, decision-making, and post-disaster reconstruction has greatly benefited communities and saved lives. In the midst of a drought in the Federated States of Micronesia, it was women who created a new well with drinkable freshwater. Women's work on the land had given them a considerable understanding of hydrology, but planners and decision-makers had not considered the possibility of their contributions. In La Masica, Honduras, women took over the task of hazard management after monitoring of the early warning system had been abandoned. Their work resulted in a swift evacuation and no deaths during Hurricane Mitch.

Women are also involved in mitigation measures to slow global warming. In November 2006, Kenya's Green Belt Movement, founded by Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai, and the World Bank's Community Development Carbon Fund,



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signed an emission reductions purchase agreement to reforest two mountain areas in Kenya. Women's groups will plant thousands of indigenous trees, which will capture 375,000 tons of carbon dioxide and restore soil lost to erosion and support regular rainfall essential to Kenya's farmers and hydro-electric power plants, the country's main source of electricity. Planting trees also provides poor, rural women with a small income and some economic independence.

In an effort to ensure gender equality and women's voices are included in the climate change discourse, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) is directing its advocacy efforts to what governments can do for further inclusion. Global negotiations on climate change, whether at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Kyoto Protocol or the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, have not adequately addressed the social impacts of this issue, if at all. Governments must act now to assess how national adaptation or other climate change plans address gender equality and to ensure that women participate in decision-making. To learn more about gender and climate change, visit www.wedo.org, which offers a fact sheet, list of resources and action recommendations.