



INTER PRESS SERVICE
NEWS AGENCY

THE STORY UNDERNEATH



DEVELOPMENT: Gender Advocates Keep a Close Eye on Climate Talks

By Lynette Lee Corporal

BANGKOK, Sep 29 (IPS) - After nine months of a rollercoaster ride pushing for a gender perspective on climate change, advocates are finally beginning to reap the fruits of their labour.

Amid dire predictions from various quarters that they will not make much of an impact on the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit scheduled for Dec. 7 to 18, representatives of the Global Gender Climate Alliance (GGCA) are nonetheless keeping their hopes high that their hard work in the last several months will pay off.

GGCA is a network of non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations as well as United Nations agencies working to ensure that climate change policies at the global, regional and national levels are gender-responsive.

Already the Alliance is watching closely the ongoing talks at the second to the last round of climate change negotiations before the December summit — otherwise known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP) 15 — which are currently underway in the Thai capital.

The Bangkok climate change conference, which opened Monday and will conclude on until Oct 9., is being attended by some 4,000 delegates from 177 countries. The last round will be held in Barcelona, Spain on Nov. 2-6.

"Nine months ago, there was absolutely no gender language in climate change negotiations. Now (in the Bangkok meetings), we are entering the negotiations with 23 paragraphs (citing) women and gender equality and equity," said Cate Owren, programme coordinator for sustainable development of the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), in a press conference here held Monday.

WEDO is one of the 38 member organisations of the GGCA, which include 13 United Nations agencies and 25 civil society organisations.

The 23 crucial references to gender are now being discussed in the ongoing talks in Bangkok for inclusion and consolidation into the negotiating text, the final draft of which will be presented in Copenhagen and will provide the basis for the implementation of projected solutions for the climate change problem.

The negotiations are being undertaken by the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA), which was formed under the Bali Action Plan that was adopted in Dec. 2007 during the United Nations Climate Change Conference in the Indonesian province.

According to Owren, the AWG-LCA is mandated to "deal with every aspect of climate change —

adaptation, mitigation, technology, finance and capacity building, as well as a shared vision".

Under the 'shared vision' aspect, for instance, the GGCA has proposed that the word 'stakeholder' in the text include "women, poor, indigenous, youth and other marginalised populations". Emphasis on data disaggregation by sex and age and the recognition of women and men as "equal stakeholders in decision making and implementation processes were also suggested for inclusion.

Oxfam's senior climate change policy advisor Heather Coleman stressed the importance of vigilance in these last few months before the Copenhagen meet in "ensuring that the gender language stays" in the negotiating text.

"We need to ensure that all parties will continue to advocate on behalf of gender. The final document is just going to be about 30 pages long, from a 180-page document we have now," she said. "We need to make sure that there will be references to gender as we reach a treaty."

Calls to include the concept of gender in the document sprang from concerns that women bear the brunt of disasters, the growing frequency and intensity of which is one of several extreme weather conditions associated with climate change.

GGCA advocates deem it ironic that while women are usually the hardest hit in natural disasters, they have no 'voice' in discussions on environment and climate change issues.

"The statistics are staggering. For every one man that dies in a natural disaster, four women perish," said Hannie Meesters, environment focal point of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Team. It is not that "women (are) naturally weaker than men" but because of the "division of gender in our society," Meesters said.

She said, for instance, that women in some countries in the region do not even know how to swim because society considers it inappropriate. Others are not allowed to go out unescorted by a male family member even during emergency situations, she added.

Citing studies made of the floods and cyclones that affected Bangladesh in 1991, Jean D'Cunha, East and South-east Asia regional programme director of the U.N. Development Fund for Women, stressed the difficulties women face in times of disasters.

During these disasters, women between ages 20 and 44 died at a rate of 71 per 1,000 for as against 15 per 1,000 for men, she said.

The ongoing emergency situation in the Philippines, brought about by a strong typhoon that inundated large parts of the capital Manila and nearby areas, is another example of how women are adversely affected by natural disasters.

"Flood levels right now are slowly decreasing and women are going back to doing household work and at the same time ... to their place of work," said Feri Lumampao, executive director of the Manila-based Approtech Asia, a non-government organisation that helps facilitate the access of the poor to appropriate technologies.

Lumampao added that sourcing water and energy – which become scarcer as climate change intensifies — is a big problem in rural areas, where "more than half of the population are women". The domestic use

of these resources is considered the main responsibility of women in traditional societies.

Other challenges, particularly to women, include food insecurity and the lack of agricultural lands to cultivate, to name a few.

"In order to cope with changes, we need new technologies to adapt and mitigate climate change, and we need financial support for that. Capacity-building activities are ongoing, but we don't see women as a major part of (these efforts) at the local level," she said.

According to the GGCA, women are particularly vulnerable to climate-change induced conditions precisely because of gender gaps and inequalities. Statistics show that 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty are women and girls. Furthermore, women own a mere one percent of the world's property, and comprise 75 percent of the world's illiterate adults.

"This is a social justice issue and ... a human rights issue," said D'Cunha. "Gender equality and women empowerment are critical to sustainable human development and human security."

Experts say climate change is not just an environmental issue but a human security and sustainable development issue as well. With its impact on biophysical environments, human settlements, food production, and basic resources like water are adversely affected and become major concerns that must be addressed.

"These transformations are likely to have widespread implications for individuals, communities, regions, and nations," said a UNDP report, ' Human Security, Vulnerability and Sustainable Adaptation'. Such impacts are readily felt by women.

Lumampao added that it is important for stakeholders to ensure that "gender equality is mainstreamed" even in climate change discussions and that "funding is provided". Just as crucial is recognising the role of women in resolving climate change problems, said Owren. "Women are more than half the world's population, she said. "Women's expertise, experiences, needs and capacities must be part of any kind of climate change discussion and solutions."

Apart from being natural resource managers and food producers, Owren also described women as "caretakers, innovators, educators, holders of critical knowledge and organizers". In effect, they are agents of change, she said.

With barely three months left before the Copenhagen summit, the GGCA members are quite optimistic that they will see the birth of new policies — a paradigm shift of sorts — come December.

"This has been such a momentous time for gender and climate change. It's a historic, exciting moment. We're very inspired and positive that something will emerge from the Copenhagen COP, and that it will be gender-sensitive," said Owren.

(END/2009)