



10-3-2017

The Real Fight Against Climate Change: What Would Woman Do?

Aishwarya Nair

University of Pennsylvania, nair.ashs@gmail.com

The Real Fight Against Climate Change: What Would Woman Do?

Keywords

women and climate change

The Real Fight Against Climate Change: What Would Woman Do?

Aishwarya Nair*

Integrating the effects of climate change adds a whole layer of complexity to the already-difficult process of sustainable development. In the short run, consequences of climate change include extreme weather patterns and a preponderance of natural disasters. The longer term effects however – the impacts on biodiversity, human health, and agriculture and food security – are far more serious, especially when considered in light of gender disparity and access to water rights.

Vulnerability to climate change and its adverse effects is not uniform across countries and regions. Often, the links between climate change and human security¹ are not easily quantified, even when there are clear connections between variables.² Nor is the impact of climate change the same across gender, especially when factoring in poverty. Women, in general, are poorer than men and more dependent on the primary resources that are threatened first by climate change (Denton 2000). This is especially true in the rural context. They bear a greater burden in contending with increases in extreme weather patterns: leaving aside their other duties, as family caretakers, women bear the added responsibility of caring for the sick. With sickness levels expected to increase as a result of climate change, this will disproportionately add to the cost to women. Within a purely domestic context, as it is the women who are the managers of their families' water supply, increasing shortages mean that they are forced to walk further and make multiple trips to collect water. In 2002, the United Nations Production Fund estimated that in many developing countries, women walk an average of six kilometers each day to collect water (UNPFA 2002). Not only do these long treks impact their daily routine, it also makes them more vulnerable to violence and assault.

Climate change is expected to dramatically increase water scarcity and stress, meaning that women will need to walk further and spend more time gathering water. When they do find water, there is no guarantee that the water that they collect is safe drinking water. Heat waves and shortages can have an adverse effect on water quality. Regular contact with poor quality water means that women face a high exposure to water-borne diseases and pollution. As one example, the United Nations Environment Program estimates that women make up seventy percent of the world's blind, from having being infected, directly or indirectly, with trachoma, a blinding bacterial eye infection occurring in communities with limited access to water (UNEP 2004).

In rural areas of the developing world, women are also still the primary procurers of food, energy and water for their families. Depending on the norms and traditions of their particular societies, women play different roles in the food production cycle. In some countries, women are the

main producers of staples and food crops; in others, they work on family farms or plots, or as paid or unpaid laborers. As temperatures and rainfall seasons become more erratic, leading to changes in the length of the growing season, the effect will carry over to changes in markets, food prices, and supply chain infrastructure. In relation to the water-food nexus, the increased severity and frequency of droughts and floods could "dramatically reduce crop yields and livestock numbers and productivity especially in semiarid areas" (Allouche 2011). These climate change-induced food shortages will have impacts on women as laborers, family caretakers and food procurers and producers. These impacts will have to be addressed through mitigation techniques and anticipating food distribution problems. With the impacts of climate change becoming more severe and tangible, the question thus becomes whether the particular vulnerability of women is due to them, on average, being poorer than men or because women's traditional roles and responsibilities are especially prone to the effects of climate change. The majority of the gender-specific characteristics that increase a person's vulnerability to climate change (dependence on local natural resources, lack of alternative income, responsibility for care for the sick, etc.) are in fact characteristics of women in societies of extreme poverty (Skutsch 2002). It seems intuitive, then, to suggest that gender issues should be incorporated into development projects and policy at all levels. But despite the fact that it is women who have abundant knowledge of local water resources, area biodiversity, crop rotation and soils, they are often excluded from the decision-making processes.

This is not to say that it hasn't been tried. Previous attempts, however, have only met with partial success. One possible explanation is that many countries, as well as the international debate in general, continue to address land-use and water issues in rural areas separately, even though there is a clear link between entitlement to water and entitlement to land. In many local government arrangements, women are not viewed as decision-makers or managers of productive resources. be ensured that the benefits of intervention accrue to both sexes equally. As a result, most initiatives aimed at improving the welfare of the poor farmer solely address issues of cash crops and livestock – issues close at heart for men – and fail to take into account the role of women and their particular concerns.

Allowing for the equal participation of men and women in decision-making is thus a prerequisite in adapting to climate change. Though the international stage has several principles and encouragement for securing such participation, both within and between governments, implementation has been a challenge. A first step in the right direction could be to formulate policies that recognize the nexus of land and water rights, focusing especially on the limited access granted to women. Projects and policies must further recognize gender-differentiated roles, skills, and in areas where there is most benefit to women, their participation must

*Aishwarya Nair
Master of Environmental Studies
Department of Earth and Environmental Studies
University of Pennsylvania
Nair.ash@gmail.com

actively be included. These instruments must recognize that men and women are subject to unique risks and vulnerabilities, and that they bear different responsibilities in environmental change and impact mitigation. To encourage the participation of women in climate change projects, and to address the power imbalance, it must be ensured that the benefits of intervention accrue to both sexes equally.

Finally, a better system for sharing information across agencies must be instituted. Current literature suggests that although strong efforts are made to document female participation in resource management, there is little information when it comes to their success at involving women in such projects across the world. For example, in India, the Women's Collective of Tamil Nadu has brought together the indigenous knowledge of the local women farmers with science to help solve the problems of crop yields and malnutrition in the area (Schafer 2012). These success stories must be shared across the world so that the value of women's involvement can benefit communities everywhere. The real fight against climate change will be lost unless we incorporate the voices of women, complete with their extensive knowledge and experience, to help respond more effectively to the different demands and capacities of both genders.

Works Cited

Allouche, Jeremy. "The sustainability and resilience of global water and food systems: Political analysis of the interplay between security, resource scarcity, political systems and global trade." *Food Policy* 36(1), January 2011: S3-S8.

Denton, Fatma. "Gender Impact of Climate Change: A Human Security Dimension." *Energia News* 3(3) 3, no. 3 (2000): 13-14.

Schafer, Lindsay. "Supporting Small Farmers: Working Toward the Goal of Food Security for All." *Student Reporter*. March 20, 2012. <http://www.studentreporter.org/supporting-small-farmers-working-toward-the-goal-of-food-security-for-all> (accessed March 24, 2012).

Skutsch, Margaret M. "Protocols, Treaties, and Action: The 'Climate Change Process' Viewed through Gender Spectacles." *Gender and Development* 10, no. 2 (July 2002): 30-39.

United Nations Environment Programme. *Women and the Environment*. UNEP/Earthprint, 2004.

United Nations Population Fund. *Water: A Critical Resource*. 2002.

1 The term "human security" first appeared in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report and argued that the proper understanding of security, especially in a rapidly global world, should be the individual rather than the state. The report suggested that the term should be expanded to include threats in seven areas: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security.

2 Land degradation, for example, is connected to food and economic insecurity. The yield of agricultural land, in turn, is affected by shortages in rainfall and water supplies. Increasing fuel shortages can hinder efforts to pump water from dropping water tables as well as hinder economic development in the region and add to food insecurity.

Photo Credit: McKay Savage