

# Changing the Climate:

## Why Women's Perspectives Matter



### *Climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our time.*

Extreme weather and natural disasters are 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. Despite increased media coverage and public awareness many governments have yet to act.

Unquestionably, climate change will affect everyone. But **women are the most vulnerable and the best poised to curb the effects of climate change.** Yet, they have remained invisible in these efforts. Governments' main tools for tackling climate change—mitigation measures to slow down global warming and adaptation measures to decrease the consequences—are not yet reaching the most affected populations, particularly women.

In every society, women and men have distinct responsibilities, knowledge and needs which are essential to addressing the effects of climate change.<sup>i</sup> **Climate change magnifies existing inequalities and gender inequality is among the most pervasive.**<sup>ii</sup> Women's historic disadvantages—their restricted access to resources and information and their limited power in decision-making—make them most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

**WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENT & DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION**

355 Lexington Avenue, 3rd Fl., New York, NY 10017 U.S.A

TEL: 212-973-0325 / [wedo@wedo.org](mailto:wedo@wedo.org) / [www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org)



# CLIMATE CHANGE AMPLIFIES INEQUALITY

As the majority of the world's poor, women are disproportionately affected by swift environmental changes. This is true even in industrialized countries. In the US, Hurricane Katrina entrenched poor African-American women, already the most impoverished group in the nation, in deeper levels of poverty. Poor women living in developing countries face even greater obstacles.

## **Women Suffer Rising Consequences**

*Women made up 55-70% Banda Aceh tsunami deaths.<sup>iii</sup>*

*In the worst affected village in the North Aceh District of Indonesia, Kuala Cangkoy, 80% of the deaths were women.<sup>iv</sup>*

*70% of the deaths during the 2003 European heat wave were women.<sup>v</sup>*

## **access to basic needs**

As climates change, access to basic needs and natural resources becomes a challenge. And natural disasters often reinforce traditional gender roles. Rural women in developing countries are still largely responsible for securing food, water, and energy for cooking and heating. Drought, deforestation, and erratic rainfall cause women to work harder to secure these resources. Women, therefore, have less time to earn income, get an education, or provide care to families. Girls regularly drop out of school to help their mothers gather fuel wood and water.

In nearly all societies, women still have unequal access to information and capital and less power to make decisions. During natural disasters, often more women die than men because they aren't warned, can't swim or can't leave the house alone.<sup>vi</sup> Women usually have fewer assets than men to recover from natural disasters, and they often don't own land that can be sold to secure income in an emergency. Women also make up the majority of the world's agricultural laborers and rely heavily on fertile land and regular rainfall.<sup>vii</sup>

## **climate change fuels conflict**

A shortage of natural resources can lead to conflict, and conflict amplifies existing gender inequalities. Shortfalls in seasonal rains have resulted in drought and economic distress that lead to a 50% increase in the likelihood of civil war.<sup>viii</sup> While men are more likely to be killed or injured in fighting, women suffer greatly from the indirect consequences of conflict.

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.<sup>ix</sup> The vast majority of the world's refugees are women and children.<sup>x</sup>

## **case:**

### **drought, wells & gender blindness**

*In the midst of a drought in the Federated States of Micronesia, it was women who dug into the ground and created a new well that filled with drinkable fresh-water. Women's work on the land had given them a considerable understanding of hydrology (the science of water below the Earth's surface and in the atmosphere), but planners and decision-makers had not considered the possibility of their contributions.*

**The effects of climate change are multifaceted:** social, political, and economic as well as environmental. By recognizing that women are key agents of environmental transformation, we also counter the gender inequalities that render climate change so devastating to women.

# WOMEN: UNTAPPED RESOURCES

Another consequence of gender inequality is that women are often perceived primarily as victims and not as positive agents of change. However, women can be key agents of adaptation to climate change. Their responsibilities in households, communities and as stewards of natural resources position them well to develop strategies for adapting to changing environmental realities. For

example, We have seen time and again that communities fare better during natural disasters when women play a leadership role in early warning systems and reconstruction.<sup>xi</sup> Women tend to share information related to community well being, choose less polluting energy sources, and adapt more easily to environmental changes when their family's survival is at stake.

## case: carbon, women & trees

*In November 2006, the Green Belt Movement, founded by Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, and the World Bank's Community Development Carbon Fund Project signed an Emission Reductions Purchase Agreement (ERPA) to reforest two mountain areas in Kenya. Women's groups will plant thousands of indigenous trees on 2,000 hectares of the Aberdares and Mt. Kenya forest ranges. By 2017, the trees they plant will have captured 375,000 tons of carbon dioxide and restore soil lost to erosion and support regular rainfall--essential to Kenya's farmers and hydro-power plants, the country's main source of electricity. Planting the trees also provides poor, rural women with a small income and with it some economic independence and a greater measure of control over their lives.*

**“Women must be at the heart of relief efforts and the re-building of shattered communities.”**

Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)<sup>xii</sup>

Global climate change negotiation--including the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol--are narrowly focused on emissions reductions, rather than social impacts. Even the latest UN research from the report on climate change completely omits social or gender concerns.<sup>xiii</sup> To date, four out of

the fourteen National Adaptation Plans of Action that have been submitted to the global climate change convention specifically mention the importance of gender equality.<sup>xiv</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out global benchmarks on gender equality, poverty eradication, and environmental sustainability, although national reports have so far neglected to seriously address the linkages between these areas.<sup>xv</sup> And a recent UNEP survey of environment ministries found only 2 countries engaged in climate change activities that incorporated a gender perspective.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Current policies and mechanisms are inadequate.

*UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Kyoto Protocol - international treaty and mechanism to reduce greenhouse gases.*

*Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) - allows industrialized countries to invest in projects in developing countries to offset greenhouse gas emissions.*

*Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) under the UNFCCC assesses research on climate change.*

*The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) does include gender as a cross-cutting issue, but only focused on climate change during its 2006-2007 sessions.*

# WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The connection between gender equality and sustainable development isn't new: in fact, every major global agreement on sustainable development acknowledges the importance of gender equality. National level action is especially important and government agencies and other stakeholders should ensure that gender equality is at the forefront of climate change initiatives by:

- **Undertaking a gender analysis** of national or local climate change policies, programs and/or budgets. For example, examine how national adaptation or other climate change plans include or exclude gender equality.
- **Ensuring that women participate in decisions** related to climate change and have access to capacity building. For example, enhance opportunities for participation, education, and training.
- **Developing gender-sensitive indicators** for governments to use in national reports to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).
- **Creating practical tools** that allow gender equality to be incorporated in climate change initiatives. For example, develop a mechanism for the CDM to fund projects that make renewable energy technologies more available to women.

## RESOURCES FOR ACTION

To learn more about the linkages between climate change and gender equality and what needs to be done:

**Join ...** the WEDO Sustainable Development listserv by sending an email to: [WEDOSustDev2002-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:WEDOSustDev2002-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

**Visit ...** [www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org), the Sustainable Development section of WEDO's website for resources and recommended actions on the intersection of gender equality and climate change.

**Contact ...** [wedo@wedo.org](mailto:wedo@wedo.org) for more information or to get involved.

---

Cover photo credit: Tai Seeff

i Dankelman, Irene, "Climate change: learning from gender analysis and women's experiences of organizing for sustainable development," *Gender & Development*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 2002.

ii UNDP Development Report 2005.

iii "UNIFEM Responds to the Tsunami Tragedy – One Year Later: A Report Card," 2005.

iv "Gender and the Tsunami," Oxfam Briefing Note, March 2005.

v BBC News Online, "French Heat Toll Almost 15,000," September 25, 2003.

vi Global Warming: Women Matter, UNFCCC COP Women's Statement, December 2005.

vii UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Gender and Food Security, Division of Labor, "Facts and figures," undated.

viii Miguel, Edward, Satyanath, Shankar, and Ernest Sergenti, "Economic Shocks and Civil Conflict: An Instrumental Variables Approach," Bureau for Research in Economic Analysis of Development (BREAD), Working Paper No. 040, August 2003.

ix Osei-Agyemang, Mimi, "Temperatures Rising," *Women & Environments*, Spring/Summer, 2007.

x Silva, Darla, "Beyond Resettlement - Prospects for Health and Hope for the Forgotten Majority," U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus, September 25, 2003.

xi IUCN, "Gender Aspects of Climate Change," March 2007.

xii Statement by UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Heyzer, January 2005.

xiii Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

xiv UNFCCC website – National Adaptation Programmes of Action.

xv UNDP website - MDG country reports.

xvi UNEP Government Survey: Gender Mainstreaming Among Environment Ministries, December 2006.