

Applying a gender lens to climate actions: why it matters



This brief explores the gender-specific effects of climate change and how inequality can exacerbate the impacts of climate-induced disasters. Gender inequalities, fueled by societal norms and defined gender roles, affect not only women’s exposure to hazards, but also limit their resilience and adaptive capabilities. Therefore, governments are urged to examine the impacts of climate change through a gender lens to address key barriers to gender-responsive climate actions, and increase the roles that women play in decision-making to close such vulnerability gaps. This policy brief is an outcome of the reflections of speakers in a panel discussion organized by Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) under the “Climate Talks” series. The topic of the discussion was *Applying a gender lens to climate actions: why it matters*.

The link between gender and climate change impacts

Gender is a major factor to consider while addressing and mitigating the fallout of climate-induced disasters. For instance, the way men and women are affected by climate change and their capacity to recover is differently shaped by social conditioning and socioeconomic factors (World Bank, 2021). Defined gender roles in rural South Asian societies have a tendency to dictate the nature of both impact and recovery.

Women contribute significantly to environmental sustainability, food security and adaptation efforts. However, their limited access to resources, exclusion from policy and decision-making institutions and processes (Nellemann et al., 2011), and normative barriers all continue to complicate their resilience efforts thus making them more vulnerable to climate-related shocks.

Gender equality refers to how social, behavioral, cultural attributes, expectations and norms determine the way in which women and men relate to each other and to the resulting differences in power between them (World Bank, 2012).

For example, the findings of a recent study suggest that women's participation in climate change initiatives in Bangladesh remains largely controlled and shaped by gender divisions of labor, social norms and customary traditions (Tanjeela and Rutherford, 2018).

Furthermore, increasing feminization of agriculture has pushed women towards greater vulnerability and insecurity. In this context, male out-migration may create new risks and vulnerabilities for the women, children and other family members who stay behind.

Climate-related hazards have gender-specific effects because women are the most vulnerable group; notably making up a large proportion of the poor population (Shabib and Khan, 2014). They are thus more likely to suffer from disaster-related adaptation like switching from one

livelihood to another in an effort to deal with climate change. There have been cases in Bangladesh and in the Terai region of Nepal where women quit rice farming and opted for duck farming instead, until they were given access to flood-resistant varieties of rice. While these solutions work in some cases, the concept of 'building back better' is not always an option for this demographic.

Gender inequalities fueled by gender norms, proscribed roles for women and men, and other discriminatory practices not only affect women's exposure to hazards, but also limit their resilience and adaptive capabilities. During floods, for instance, women often seek refuge later than men due to fear of social retribution. In addition, accompanying children and conventional dress codes, for example, often hinder their ability to travel quickly (Shabib and Khan, 2014).

The patterns of climate change and other hazards, such as, droughts, heat waves, cyclones, and erratic rainfalls, etc. make women's tasks more difficult by increasing their workload and adding physical and psychological stress. Often, during and in the aftermath of such disasters, women and girls are the ones to skip meals or go hungry when there is a food shortage (Alston, 2015). In addition, emergency relief shelters may lack proper hygienic supplies for menstruating girls and pregnant and lactating women. Importantly, there is also the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) for women who find themselves vulnerable in a potentially unsafe environment of makeshift relief shelters.

Climate Resilience (CR) and Disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts needs to take all these factors into account. Organizations such as the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC), which has worked to organize 'women for climate justice' since 2011, include South Asian organizations based in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries among its members. Now, more than ever, adequate recognition of women's vulnerabilities and capacities is critical to understanding and analyzing the factors and processes that continue to widen gender gaps between climate change policy intentions and outcomes.

Key barriers to gender-responsive climate actions

The following barriers may fuel persistent gender inequalities in climate change adaptation and resilience actions:

- **Normative barriers** are associated with socio-cultural gender norms, which shape the roles and responsibilities of men and women in public and private spaces. Gender norms and perceptions and the attitudes that feed them frame the context within which men and women participate and contribute to various livelihood-related activities.
- **Structural barriers** refer to an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities. Asset distribution is very gendered, and in many parts of developing countries, the percentage of women's ownership rights to land is negligible. While women produce 60–80 percent of the food in these countries, their sole or joint ownership of agricultural land is merely 10–20 percent (FAO, 2019).
- **Capacity barriers** signify, among other realities, women's limited access to knowledge and information, extension, training, innovation, and technology.
- **Decision-making barriers** highlight the gap that exists in terms of women's representation in decision-making at local, provincial and national levels. This imbalance results in women having less of a voice in decisions related to climate change programs and policies.

Global and national commitments for gender-responsive climate actions

The importance of gender-responsive climate policy has been reflected in international decisions and legal frameworks. Since the seventh session of the Conference of Parties (COP 7) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2001, several negotiations affecting the goals of gender equality and women's empowerment

vis-à-vis climate actions have been completed. Among the outcomes of such negotiations has been the Lima Work Program on Gender. Likewise, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) recommends gender-sensitive climate actions and promotes a stronger role of women in building resilience.

In order to build climate resilience, it is necessary to address gender gaps in climate actions. Notably, gender mainstreaming in climate actions offers an opportunity not only to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality), but also to contribute to SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 13 (climate action).

Adaptation and resilience to climate change is an essential part of UNFCCC guidelines and requirements. National adaptation programmes of action (NAPA), local adaptation plans of action (LAPA), national climate change policies and frameworks, and intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) highlight commitments to climate change adaptation and mitigation in agriculture and allied sectors like water, transport and infrastructure. For instance, the Bangladesh Climate Change Gender Action Plan (ccGAP) has focused on increasing women's involvement in climate change-related infrastructure development and management.

Similarly, the ccGAP for Nepal also clearly indicates increasing women's representation in management roles in the transportation sector by engaging them proactively. One of its highlighted action steps is promoting women to take up roles relating to law and regulation enforcement at the local level in the police, construction inspections services, etc. (MoEnv, 2012).

Gender mainstreaming approach in CARE for South Asia project

Mainstreaming gender perspectives is one of the cross-cutting thematic areas of the Climate Adaptation and Resilience (CARE) for South Asia project. The overall objective of gender mainstreaming is to contribute to an enabling environment for gender-responsive, climate-resilient policies and investments in the sectors of public policy and finance,

climate smart agriculture, integrated water resources management and resilient transport infrastructure in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

CARE for South Asia's strategy has adopted the following four strategic action areas:

- Policy review and mapping, and assessment of the current gender landscape in relation to climate-resilient development in key sectors
- Capacity development for gender mainstreaming in key sectors
- Development of gender action plans
- Knowledge generation and dissemination

A combination of strategic and integrated gender approaches hopes to improve access to gender-related information in relation to climate change in key sectors, together with enhanced capacities. This will enable governments in the project countries to take gender-informed decisions for policymaking and planning of the multiple initiatives and investments

Closing the vulnerability gap between women and men

Climate adaptation interventions designed with recognition of multiple roles women and men play in risk governance and climate resilience at both local and national levels have the potential for achieving gender-equal outcomes. The successful implementation of interventions targeting women's empowerment and gender equality supported by adequate resources has produced significant results.

Developments in the project countries suggest some progress has been made. For instance, mainstreaming of gender equality and social inclusion has been included in the revised Climate Change Policy 2019 of Nepal as one of its seven objectives; the earlier version of the policy (2011) did not include any gender-related objectives. In Bangladesh, it has been noted that, through constant government and non-government sector initiatives, women are better sensitized to climate change issues and better

informed in terms of preparedness for future disasters. In Pakistan, there have been efforts towards a meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making at the community level through steps such as the development and implementation of gender-equality strategies and action plans based on comprehensive analysis of community-based disaster risk management, climate resilient infrastructure, sustainable livelihood, and climate smart agriculture, etc.

Ensuring gender-responsive climate actions

There is an urgent need to translate legislation into action, both at the regional and local levels. Despite women's known contributions to agriculture and allied sectors, such as water, forestry, infrastructure and transport, governments' provisions to support gender-responsive climate actions are often limited to laws and policies. A dedicated gender-responsive budget, however small, may be the answer. Gender and climate change data is not sufficient in this region and needs to be adequately generated, just as the capacity of sectoral implementing agencies and the sectoral approach on the whole must be strengthened.

It is essential to ensure that gender and vulnerability assessments form an integral part of sectoral climate change policies and strategies. These include assessments at every stage of the DRR cycle—pre, during, and post-disaster—and the involvement of the mainstream media in awareness initiatives. As a number of policy documents are currently under review in many South Asian countries, gender-responsive climate actions can be implemented by incorporating relevant revisions now.

Speaking to this need, the CARE for South Asia project aims to support and facilitate the following areas:

- Revision of existing key sectoral policies, backed by gender analysis and vulnerability assessments. The revised policies and strategies should aim to eliminate existing structural and normative gender barriers in order to enhance women's access to assets and services and their roles in decision-making.

- Applying a cross-sectoral approach in engaging key sectors, national women commissions/women ministries and ministries of finance and planning. Considering the importance of local level adaptation actions and women's roles therein, concrete programmatic solutions need to be supported by provincial policies promoting participation of women's organizations.
- Strengthening the capacities of key sectoral national and sub-national departments, ministries and other relevant institutions on effective implementation of gender-responsive climate actions.
- Promoting effective gender responsive budgeting (GRB), which should be backed by periodic review of sectoral spending vis-à-vis allocation in order to monitor whether the GRB is producing its intended outputs.

Women have been playing important roles in climate change adaptation, disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts even in the contexts where access to productive resources is limited. Shifting social norms can create entry points for women's economic empowerment, as well as for their participation in decision-making (UNEP, 2020). Their involvement often results in better performance and has a transformative effect on the communities they serve (World Bank, 2021).

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