

Women, climate change, and inequality*

Sumudu Atapattu

University of Wisconsin Law School, USA

The climate-gender nexus is now well recognized in literature and there is general consensus that climate change can exacerbate gender inequalities. Women, like indigenous peoples, constitute a group that will be disproportionately affected by climate change.¹ Women in many parts of the world tend to be poorer than men and lack access to resources, finance and decision-making. While gender-based discrimination exists in many societies where women are in a subordinated position, they are also the main caregivers, responsible for providing food, child rearing and other day to day responsibilities. In many families they have also become the main breadwinners.

This lecture seeks to discuss the climate-gender nexus through a rights and justice lens. It discusses how women are portrayed as both victims and virtuous and traces the inclusion of gender in the climate change legal regime. It proceeds in five parts. Section 1 will discuss women and climate vulnerability. Section 2 will discuss international human rights law that relates to gender equality and non-discrimination, including the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and use this as the theoretical framework that informs this chapter. Section 3 will discuss gender and UNFCCC while section 4 will discuss specific topics relating to women: forced migration; natural disasters; adaptation; mitigation; and human security. It will conclude by discussing whether the environmental (climate) justice and human security can provide an additional layer of protection for women who face considerable hardship in relation to climate change. The lecture will not, however, discuss the origins of the women's movement or the history of the gender and environment movement. While these milestones are important in relation to the legal landscape, they have received significant scholarly attention and it serves no purpose to rehash that literature here. Even the literature on climate change and gender has grown

* This excerpt is from author's book *Human Rights Approaches to Climate Change: Challenges and Opportunities* (Routledge, 2015), chapter 8

¹ See Nellesmann, C., Verma, R., and Hislop, L. (2011), *Women at the Frontline of Climate Change: Gender Risks and Hopes* (UNEP), Birkeland Trykkeri AS, Norway

exponentially within a short span of time and this chapter can only scratch the surface of this very important issue.

Women and climate vulnerability

Men and women experience climate change differently and women are more dependent on climate-sensitive sectors, predominantly agriculture.² There are many reasons why women are more vulnerable to environmental degradation in general and climate change in particular:

Women in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to climate change because they are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood. Women charged with securing water, food and fuel for cooking and heating, face the greatest challenges. Women experience unequal access to resources and decision-making processes, with limited mobility in rural areas. It is thus important to identify gender-sensitive strategies that respond to these crises for women.³

Lack of access to resources and finance and the exclusion of women from the decision-making processes coupled with discrimination are considered as the main reasons for the increased vulnerability of women in relation to climate change. Moreover, cultural norms, social marginalization and sometimes religious beliefs contribute to such vulnerability and exclusion. Seventy percent of the world's poor are women "due to unequal access to resources, established gender roles, and lack of participation in decision making processes."⁴ Moreover, in rural Africa, they perform up to 95 percent of all domestic tasks and women's labor input is estimated to be three times that of men.⁵

² See Skinner, E., Gender and Climate Change Overview Report, Institute for Development Studies (November 2011), p. 2

³ See UNDP (2011) *Global Gender and Climate Alliance, Overview of Linkages Between Gender and Climate Change*. Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/gender/Gender%20and%20Environment/PB1-AP-Overview-Gender-and-climate-change.pdf>

⁴ See Abebe, M. A. (2014) 'Climate Change, Gender Inequality and Migration in East Africa', *Washington Journal of Environmental Law & Policy*, vol. 4, p. 114.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Discussing the impact of climate change on rural women in East Africa, Abebe notes that gender gaps remain a challenge in most East African countries. Rural women experience a subordinate and marginal status because of patriarchal values and have unequal status in relation to education, political, economic, and social spheres.⁶

While appreciating that no two situations are identical and generalizations are not helpful, it can be pointed out that these observations apply equally to rural women in many parts of the world. Moreover, in many rural communities, women and girl children are in charge of fetching water and gathering fuelwood. In drier areas and during drier seasons, they have to walk long distances to collect water, firewood and food. During these times, their work load increases because they have to walk even longer distances in search of water,⁷ and have less time for other activities as education, further entrenching unequal gender relations.⁸ Furthermore, this puts them at a greater risk of sexual assault or harassment.⁹ Climate change will exacerbate these vulnerabilities because of heightened resource scarcity.

Despite such marginalization and exclusion, women have much to contribute to strategies to address climate change and development in general. They are the agents of change; they have intimate knowledge of their families and their needs; they are the main providers and caregivers and, in many households, they have become the main breadwinner. Because they are predominately engaged in farming and agriculture, they have intimate knowledge of the land. Involving them in adaptation and mitigation strategies and decisions relating to climate change not only constitutes good practice but is also imperative. International climate change law has recognized this. In fact, gender equality was the first reference made to human rights in the legal regime governing climate change.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ See Human Development Report, *supra* note 1, p 13

⁸ See Skinner, *supra* note 3, p. 2

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ See Bali Action Plan, 2007, available at: <<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2007/cop13/eng/06a01.pdf>>