

Gender issue in climate change discourse: theory versus reality

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Executive Summary

Gender refers to the social roles and relations between women and men, which include different responsibilities of women and men in a given culture and location. Even though gender has become one of the themes of analysis in development policy discourses yet it received little emphasis in climate change policies. By reviewing literature related to climate change and gender issue this paper finds that women are more vulnerable to climate disasters than men through their socially constructed roles and responsibilities, and their relatively poorer and more economically vulnerable position, especially in the developing world. In Bangladesh, gender inequalities with respect to enjoyment of human rights, political and economic status, land ownership, housing conditions, exposure to violence, education and health (in particular reproductive and sexual health) -- make women more vulnerable before, during and after climate change-induced disasters. Finally the paper argues that enhancement of institutional capacity to mainstream gender in global and national climate change and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies and operations through the development of gender policies, gender awareness, internal and external gender capacity and expertise, and the development and application of relevant mechanisms and tools should be prioritized for a pro-poor development in the realm of climate contingencies.

Introduction

Climate change is no longer a matter of scientific discourse, nor at best a technical issue discussed and debated in highbrow academic seminars and 'expert consultations' rather has appeared as major development challenge due to its pervasive effects hovering over economic to social to political sectors that bind people of every stage in the society, regardless of race, caste, ethnicity, sex, and level of income. The traditional "far-off" perception to climate change has now become a hard reality in everyday life, especially in the developing and least developed countries. Case studies across the globe allude to the uncomfortable fact that climate change impacts are more heavily felt by poor nations and communities due to their weaker resistance capacity (IPCC, 2007). This predicament is also indicative of the existing inequalities. Gender discrimination, one of most striking dimension and manifestation of such inequalities, however has often remained typically overlooked in climate change-related discussions and interventions.

In the developing countries women are heavily engaged in resource-dependant activities such as agriculture, forest management etc. (Davison, 1988). As climate variability directly affect natural resources bases and there by resource dependant activities, therefore women are likely to be affected disproportionately due to their overwhelming dependency and low technical knowledge to adapt to abrupt situation. Apparently, women are more vulnerable to climate disasters than men through their socially constructed roles and responsibilities, and their relatively poorer and more economically vulnerable position. Gender inequalities with respect to enjoyment of human rights, political and economic status, land ownership, housing conditions, exposure to violence, education and health (in particular reproductive and sexual health) -- make women more vulnerable before, during and after climate change-induced disasters.

Climate change makes women's life and work harder. Women are generally responsible for collecting food and water for the household members. However, climate change disrupting the food production system and global hydrological cycle. In many countries water scarcity due to less rainfall in dry season forcing women and girls to walk long distance to collect safe drinking water for family members. Its is reported that women in sub-Saharan Africa spend 40 billion hours per year collecting water, which is equivalent to a year's worth of labour by the entire workforce in France (Lenton *et al.* 2005)

Despite being affected most from climate change, women's role in adaptation and mitigation is praiseworthy. Women generally possesses a strong body of knowledge and expertise regarding their surroundings that have accumulated over time through their active involvement in resource management can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster risk reduction and adaptation strategies. More practically, in many developing countries women are found in building anti-flood embankments, and increasing off-farm employment during crisis periods which can be best illustrated as coping mechanisms against climate change.

Theoretical puzzles

There is still common perception to many that gender is the favouring of women's rights and responsibilities. This misleading and partial understanding give rise to inequality in the society that is rooted in the people's cognition level. In real terms, gender is not a practice but denotes to a causal

relationship between man and women in case of different responsibilities that the society assigned. In academia, gender refers to the social roles and relations between women and men which include different responsibilities of women and men in a given culture and location. Where as, gender equality refers to “the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality between men and women is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development” (UNDP 2009). Gender analysis, however, is closely related to power analysis, and recognised as an important conceptual tool in addressing differential vulnerabilities, and predicaments of women (vis-à-vis men), arising out of social norms, customs or even, state policies.

Women’s vulnerability to climate disasters

Women’s vulnerability is unlike men that have developed through the socialization process overtime and, therefore should be treated accordingly. Women are more vulnerable to climate disasters not because they are physically weak, but they face different conditionality in the societies guided by superstitious customs. Generally, in many developing countries women often live in conditions of social exclusion, such as cultural limitations to mobilize outside their immediate environment; have less access to information to early warning systems in times of disasters, and to forecasts of climate variability; and have difficulties in participating in training processes (UNDP, 2009).

Women, generally, are responsible for reproductive tasks such as food collection and energy supply for the household as well as many care-giving tasks, such as caring for the children, sick and elderly and the home and assets. In many societies, socio- cultural norms and care giving responsibilities prevent women from migrating to look for shelter and work when a disaster hits. Water, sanitation and health challenges put extra burden on women in case of many disasters. Moreover, women are often reported to embrace risk to rescue others during disaster situations in a characteristically self-sacrificing attitude.

Various climate change induced disasters such as drought, cyclones, and erratic rainfall cause women to work harder to secure (natural) resources and livelihood. In such situations, women have less time to earn income, get an education or training, or to participate in institutional fora (e.g. governing bodies). Despite governmental support, poor girls regularly drop out of school to help their mothers to gather wood and water in the changed harsher climatic condition.

During cyclones and floods, women and adolescent girls suffer as sanitation systems are destroyed. Pregnant women, lactating mothers and differently-abled (disabled) women suffer the most as they find it difficult to quickly move to safety before and after any disaster hit.

Women have differential nutritional requirements based on age; particularly they need special nutrition when they are pregnant or at breast-feeding stage. However, the patriarchal society pays less attention to women diet and, therefore suffering from malnutrition become obvious. For instance, in South and Southeast Asia, 45-60% of women of reproductive age are below normal weight and 80% of pregnant women have iron deficiencies (FAO, 2000). In Bangladesh, women are more calorie-deficient than men (the male members in a family have the "right" to consume the best portions of the food, and the female members have to content themselves with the left-overs) and have more problems during disasters to cope with. Moreover, an increase in the number of female-headed households (because of male out-migration to cities or overseas destinations) also amplifies women's

responsibilities and vulnerabilities during natural disasters. Therefore, in case of disasters, often women are found to struggle to cope with their household tasks or to find a safe shelter.

Climate change plays a significant role in spreading vector borne diseases such as malaria in some high altitude areas of African countries in one hand and water borne diseases such as cholera outbreaks in some South Asian countries on the other hand. A recent estimate indicates that 70% of variation of recent cholera outbreaks in Bangladesh is due to climate change (IUCN, 2007). The situation is more challenging for women as they have less access to medical services than men. Moreover, their regular workloads also increase due to taking care of sick in time of such diseases outbreaks.

More women die during natural disasters compared to men because they are not adequately warned, cannot swim well or cannot leave the house alone (UNFCCC, 2005). Moreover, lower levels of education reduce the ability of women and girls to access information including early warning, and resources, or to make their voices heard. A recent study conducted jointly by the London School of Economics, the University of Essex and the Max-Planck Institute of Economics, analyzing natural disasters between 1981 and 2002 of 141 countries reveals evidences of socially constructed gender specific vulnerability of women built into everyday socio-economic patterns that leads to the relatively higher female disaster mortality rates compared to those of men. For example, the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh killed 138,000 people, many of whom were women and older than 40 years (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007).

Post-disaster situation and women

Immediately after disasters, deaths, diseases and injuries occur from many incidences such as waterborne diseases, snake bites, drowning, fall of large trees and collapse of physical structures. In all such cases of danger, women are particularly susceptible. Generally, lack of medical facilities, malnutrition, disrupted supply of pure drinking water and lack of proper sanitation facilities make women's life more vulnerable.

In the societies where dogmatic religious customs and rituals prevail, most often disaster relief efforts pay little or no attention to women's reproductive and sexual health guided by superstitions, and as a result, women's health suffers disproportionately. There are many incidents often reported in the media that women have been abused sexually by the male relief seekers in congestion during the distribution of relief goods and services. This has put off many deserving women from participation in relief programmes despite their great need and demand.

In case of flooding and water logging situation livelihood opportunities reduced to only catching fishes or collecting water-lily, esculent roots of water-lily in rural Bangladesh. Women and girls are often found to catch fish in the inundated area, most often the middle aged or adolescent girls catch fish at night or very early in the morning to avoid derogatory responses from the society as in rural areas women's work outside home in front of strangers is unacceptable from religious point of view, standing hours in waist-height filthy water to feed hungry family members (Ahmed *et al.* 2007). Prolonged exposure to dirty and contaminated water with different pollutants, pathogens and waste give rise to skin diseases to women in sensitive reproductive organs. However, most often women are found to hide such skin diseases due to societal faulty view to such diseases as unacceptable secret diseases or sometimes women's instinct introversion.

Women in climate Change adaptation and mitigation

Women play very crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation, even though their contribution is overlooked or less acknowledged. Many of their works related to natural resources management are contributing to mitigation actions. Whereas, women perform many activities for the well being of their family members, which simultaneously can be regarded as well designed adaptation practices. Women adopt diverse and intense household resource-use strategies to cope with food deficit situations, especially during lean seasons and natural disasters. They intensify their efforts in homestead production and seek non-farm production options for the well-being of the family. Moreover, women perform some infrastructural development to conserve the soil and water and also to avoid floods by building embankments which presumably make a large contribution to the efforts required to confront climate risks. For instance, women's organisation in Senegal have helped to build crescent shaped canals to retain water, recover crop lands and improve agricultural output in the Keur Moussa community, where previously young men and women were migrated to city due to flooding and river bank erosion that were destroying their cropping lands (Dankelman *et al.*, 2008).

In Bangladesh women are documented to adopt some strategies to survive in disasters. To avoid drowning casualties of the young children in the water logging condition often mother goes to sleep by tying her child with body and sometime remain awake. Families taking shelter on the rooftop generally tie plastic bottles in the body of newborns and young children so that they do not slip into water. In rural areas women generally build houses with bamboo, wood avoiding mud so that water can easily pass through house in case of flooding. Moreover, the plinth height of the houses is raised to a certain level to reduce damage in water logging condition. Ceiling-like raised/ high platforms locally known as 'Darma' are built inside the houses to keep asset ownership documents/ deeds of the lands, other important papers/ documents, dry food (Cheera, Muri) rice, pulse salt, sugar, match stick, candle, kerosene, quilt, seeds etc safe during periods of water logging and flooding (Ahmed *et al.*, 2007).

Women also play important roles in climate change mitigation by managing households, taking care of children, raising awareness through education, involving themselves in afforestation and reforestation. Women can reduce carbon emission to a considerable amount by avoiding water and power abuse and also by slightly changing consumption behaviour such as using re-useable jute bag instead of disposable polythene in shopping, turnoff the gas stove when no cooking, serving local food stuffs to the family members, walking to children's school avoiding transports in case of short distance.

Forests, useful means of carbon sink, are more relevant and salient for women than men, where women perform a number of crucial roles -- as farmers, harvesters, users of firewood, collectors and sellers of minor forest products, and tenders of livestock. There are many examples where women are actively taking part in afforestation, reforestation programme and also contributing to halt deforestation and thereby reducing carbon emission. For example, women in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras have planted 400,000 Maya Nut trees (*Brosimum aliscastrum*) since 2001 as part of a project supported by the Equilibrium Fund (The Equilibrium Fund, 2007). Moreover, in Kenya Greenbelt Movement, founded by Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, are planting thousands of trees under World Bank's Community Development Carbon Fund which is projected to capture 350,000 tons of carbon-di-oxide along with providing income to the poor rural women (IUCN, 2007). In Bangladesh women are major work force in planting trees under social forestry programme besides their regular activity of afforestation in home gardens in rural areas.

REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) offers an opportunity to reward women for their biodiversity stewardship (especially regarding saving seeds and nurturing trees in crisis periods) through targeted and effective institutional response. In Costa Rica, the state has sold and transferred forest zones to groups of women so that they may continue receiving the advantages of environmental services (UNDP, 2009). In Bangladesh, where women have overwhelming dependency on natural resources for livelihoods in rural areas, can use Costa Rica example that would be an effective tool both for women empowerment and poverty alleviation.

Gender Issue in climate change policy regime

The latest IPCC report (2007) recognizes women as one of the most vulnerable groups from the climate change impacts. Nevertheless, the issue of gender equality and women's participation get little attention in the climate change policy regimes. The little participation or in some cases exclusion of women from climate change decision-making processes present a real challenge to women empowerment, fail to uphold human rights principles and deprives society of many skills, experiences and capacities unique to women (UNDP, 2009). Eventually, as a compensatory effort, the COP-13 (2007) in Bali, the *gendercc* - Women for Climate Justice network, a platform for information, knowledge and networking on gender and climate change, has been established with coalition of women's organizations and individuals, as well as the Global Gender and Climate Change Alliance of UN organizations, IUCN (International Union for Nature Conservation) and WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization). *GenderCC* is now actively participating in UNFCCC conferences and advocating for upholding women's rights in climate change policies. Moreover, Hyogo Framework for Action, emerged from the *World Conference on Disaster Reduction* (2005), states that "a gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training".

Gender equity is now considered as cross-cutting issue and has received due attention in sustainable development movement. The International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), and the 2005 World Summit recognized the essential role that women play in sustainable development. In its recent follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action (2005), the General Assembly highlighted the need to "involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels; integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development; and strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impacts of development and environmental policies on women" (cited in UN, 2008).

It is intriguing that gender equality is a guiding principle in National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) design. Many of the national reports submitted by signatory nations to the UNFCCC Secretariat emphasize the vulnerability of women and the importance of gender equality, though in different formats. Bangladesh submitted National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2005. NAPA acknowledges women as one of the most vulnerable groups to the climate change. However, information about causes and solutions regarding climate induced gender disparities are missing. Recently, Bangladesh prepared its Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP, 2008), which also acknowledges women's vulnerability to the climate change. The plan proposed a project (T1P9) for protecting livelihood of vulnerable socio-economic groups including women. However, it is inadequate to reduce women's vulnerability as many gender activists alleged. There is no attempt cited

in the plan to integrate gender into broader development policy frameworks as a cross-cutting issue, rather some disperse initiatives is unlikely to ensure gender equity in every sector of the economy.

Conclusion

As women constitute half of world population, climate change adaptation and mitigation policies must address the gender issues. Historically, as a natural resource manager, women possess accumulation of knowledge regarding environmental resources and practices, which could be used as key elements in climate change processes. Women's participation in climate change decisions, therefore, should be assured for concrete and integrated actions against climate change. Moreover, gender-sensitive indicators for use by governments in national reports to UNFCCC and related policies and mechanisms should be developed. In line with these, enhancement of institutional capacity to mainstream gender issue in global and national climate change and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies and operations through the development of gender policies, gender awareness, internal and external gender capacity and expertise, and the development and application of relevant mechanisms and tools should be prioritized to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Women are often portrayed as unworthy and incapable of engaging themselves in environmental and climate change related negotiations and strategic planning. This historical neglect and associated invisibility of women's role ought to be reversed. It is high time to incorporate gender issues in environmental and climate change policies and actions from a 'human rights' point of view as well.

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