

At the intersection of inequities - Lessons learned from CIFOR's work on gender and climate change adaptation in West Africa

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Key messages:

- Taking in account the specific needs of the most vulnerable – who are often women and girls – and examining issues surrounding their participation in decision-making are both needed to avoid exacerbating inequalities and advocating maladaptive actions and plans.
- Integrating gender into climate change adaptation is crucial, but the oversimplification of women as a homogenous group and the view of women as victims must first be overcome.
- Exclusion and marginalisation are often a result of the intersection of several context-specific determinants such as age, ethnic affiliation, origin and class. This needs to be considered during vulnerability analysis and adaptation planning.
- Evidence-based and context-specific gendered vulnerability assessment is needed to specifically identify not only different needs and perceptions, but also different capacities to adapt, determined by differences in assets and rights due to social status, classe, age and ethnicity.

Why does gender matter for climate change adaptation?

Climate change will affect people differently depending on their economic, environmental cultural, and social situations and contexts. A growing number of studies point to the need to recognize how crucial these differences are to understanding vulnerability (Adger and Kelly 2001; O'Brien et al 2004; Ribot 2010).

To fully grasp what shapes individual and group vulnerabilities and capacities to adapt and respond to climate change, an understanding of gender is critical. However, mainstream approaches to gender are still often characterized by oversimplifications and assumptions. Reducing gender to a binary comparison of women and men risks painting an unnuanced – or even false – picture. This might impede the effectiveness of adaptation planning and lead to unintended or harmful consequences, often affecting the most vulnerable groups or individuals. A vulnerability assessment that examines the ways in which gender intersects with other pertinent factors, such as ethnicity, economic assets and social status, is key to understanding differing vulnerabilities and capacities, and informing effective and responsive adaptation planning.

Vulnerability and adaptive capacity are also dynamic in nature. An adaptive strategy adopted by one group or individual can affect the adaptive capacity of another, either positively or negatively. Yet a clear assessment

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of gender relations may be key to understanding shifting adaptive capacities. It is increasingly evident that in order to meet climate and other development challenges, integrating considerations of gender into adaptation plans, policies and actions at all levels is necessary. We cannot hope to avoid exacerbating inequalities and advocating maladaptive actions and plans, if we do not understand and recognize the specific needs of the most vulnerable (who are often women and girls) and issues of their participation in decision making.

Beyond victimisation: Towards evidence-based vulnerability assessment

To ensure that CIFOR's work focuses on issues critical to advancing equitable adaptation, we reviewed the literature on differences in how men and women experience climate change-related problems. Most studies that conclude women are more vulnerable than men are based on comparisons between female- and male-headed households. While there is evidence that households headed by women do indeed tend to suffer greater losses in the face of climate-related shocks, this finding revealed that, somewhere along the way an unwarranted shift occurred in the "vulnerability discourse". That is, evidence on the vulnerability of female-headed households was transformed into an oversimplification about the vulnerability of women. This shift conflates two issues and suggests that women are a homogenous group, ignoring important distinctions among women due to their class, age, wealth, etc. This misguided assumption seems to still be common in climate change and gender discussions, and may be leading to misunderstandings of specific and important issues that face female-headed households.

Gendered landscapes: Shifts in ecosystems and in landscapes induce shifts in social roles and activities

CIFOR's work in West Africa shows that women often have different preferences, and priorities for adaptation and development than men. Women often have different limits and opportunities for adapting to climate change in forest- and tree-based livelihoods.

Some of the important lessons we have learned come from several CIFOR projects carried out in Africa's Sahel. This region is currently experiencing complex economic changes (e.g. markets shifts), political changes (e.g. decentralisation and changes in land tenure), and climatic changes and variability (e.g. droughts). Since the severe droughts of the 1980s, scientists have studied local livelihood strategies developed in reaction to external stressors. Livelihoods have undergone a continuous process of coping with environmental, economic, and political stressors, by adjusting their strategies or adopting new ones (Brooks et al 2009). Under environmental uncertainty and high spatial variability in precipitation, pastoralists have developed flexible individual and collective strategies for coping in reaction to shocks.

Specifically, our studies in Mali and Burkina Faso show: (i) cultural and social norms determine the strategies women and men can adopt, and (ii) strategies adopted by one group can affect the other. For instance migration is a strategy adopted mostly by men. However this strategy has an impact on women's adaptive capacity, as they must take over (many of these) men's tasks. It also increases the vulnerability of other groups, especially children. Results in Northern Mali show that households experiencing migration tend to

stop educating their children – especially girls – because of the increased workload that stems from the outmigration of men. Tasks that children take on often include livestock herding, fetching water and fuelwood, and other basic livelihood activities. On the other hand, we also observe that due to the migration of men, women may take the opportunity to engage in previous male-dominated sectors, resulting in the so-called feminization of certain activities.

This shift has been seen, for instance, in the charcoal production and livestock sectors in many CIFOR study sites in West Africa. Overall, women’s workloads usually increase due to an extreme climate event (drought) and the gendered responses to it. However, some climate change-induced effects on women are still unclear. An important question that remains is how women’s new roles and responsibilities may affect and change power relationships within the households and communities.

Our research suggests that the emerging new societal roles could empower women to negotiate new institutional arrangements to access and control resources. However, despite the active roles women often take in developing new adaptive strategies, they are frequently impeded by insecure land tenure and social restrictions on their access to markets.

Beyond men and women: The intersectional nature of inequities

Another important lesson we learned through our work on climate change adaptation in West Africa is that differences in vulnerabilities cannot be easily divided into male and female categories. This simplistic dichotomy cannot

capture the range of complexities and the dynamics of vulnerability. Other factors like age, wealth, class and ethnic affiliation are often crucial. Therefore, we integrated an emerging concept called “intersectionality” into our studies of gender and climate change. This approach calls for an integration of several factors in the gender analysis and asks how various biological, social and cultural categories determine identities, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, and contribute to systematic social marginalization and inequality.

One example of the implementation of intersectional gender analysis in Mali shows surprising vulnerability dynamics. Pastoral communities in Lake Faguibine in Northern Mali mostly belong to the Illelan social group. This group is traditionally the highest-ranked in the hierarchical Tamacheq society. Despite their higher societal roles, Illelan women seem to face more barriers as they diversify their livelihoods than do lower-ranked Iklan women. One important strategy adopted by Iklan women is charcoal production. This livelihood activity is not practiced by Illelan women. Cultural and societal barriers related to identities and hierarchical roles hinder women in Illelan communities from producing charcoal, as this activity is perceived as “beneath them”.

We also observe that Illelan women experience stronger mobility restrictions and seclusion than Iklan women. They are therefore more constrained in taking advantage of new opportunities. Social class was identified in several societies as a determining factor of women’s seclusion, mobility and autonomy, and seclusion and mobility restrictions of upper status women were reported in different contexts in North Africa, Middle East

and Afghanistan (Moghadam 2003).

Conclusions and recommendations

- Gender relations, roles and perceptions are changing at the local level, furthered by environmental and climate change impacts and the adaptation process to them. Impacts and responses to climate changes are changing gender roles and relations on the ground.
- The emerging new societal roles and responsibilities tend to initially increase workloads of women and children. However, in the long run these changes could empower women to negotiate new institutional arrangements to access and control resources.
- Adaptation planning must take into account the specific needs of the most vulnerable – who are often women and girls – as well as issues of their participation in decision making in order to avoid exacerbating inequalities and advocating maladaptive actions and plans.

Gender-sensitive analyses of climate change vulnerability and strengths must be based on solid research and should consider more complex, horizontal (inter-community) and vertical (national, regional, local) distinctions.

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This brief part of a set of briefs on gender and climate change. See the full set at CIFOR.org/gender-climate