Brief for GSDR – 2016 Update

Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change: Insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia

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Key Points and Recommendations

- Gender is not just about women, but the arrangement of roles, responsibilities and relations between men and women of different social groups, ages, educational and marital statuses. Both perceptions of risks and actual vulnerabilities are shaped by these arrangements, and hence may vary across place, time and social position/location.
- Policies still largely fail to acknowledge the intersection of social relations and identities. As these could provide a more exact understanding of adaptive behaviour, gender should form an early focus in dialogue spaces, decision making processes and policy and practice discussions.
- Adaptive strategies need to pay attention to the divisions of work between men and women to ensure that women's everyday lives are not overburdened, and that suitable technologies are put in place to support their daily tasks (e.g., ensuring water for domestic use in the context of scarcity).
- Adaptive strategies also need to work with social norms (that shape what kind of activities are appropriate for men and women to engage in) which might be restrictive but are not inflexible. To promote gender equality and improve women's rights, these norms must be considered and sometimes challenged.
- Attention needs to be paid to the growing conflict around the use and management of water and land, and the underlying causes – particularly as the monetisation and commoditisation of these resources poses a threat to the already-precarious survival of some semi-arid communities.
- New forms of diversification and collective action are emerging, and trade-offs between short-term coping strategies and longer-term adaptation are becoming more apparent. Further, by building the capacity of local communities – especially women – to access resources and ensure their voices are heard, their ability to adapt can be increased and their dependency on state welfare reduced.
- Studies on climate change vulnerability and impacts, and identification of adaptation strategies should be done from a gender-sensitive perspective. We need to better understand the potential impacts of the reorganisation of domestic groups and the rising number of female-headed households on adaptive and coping strategies, particularly in semi-arid regions in Africa.

Introduction

Vulnerabilities to impacts of climate change are gendered. Still, policy approaches aimed at strengthening local communities' adaptive capacity largely fail to recognise the gendered nature of everyday realities and experiences.

For example, gender is not addressed consistently within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): SDG 5 on gender equality mentions equal access to productive resources including land, while SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns does not recognise the relevance of gender at all, and SDG 13 on climate action identifies 'women' as a single group of people who need to be enabled to engage with climate-related planning and management.

Despite considerable lobbying and preparation by women's rights activists and many State parties, the final Paris Agreement (COP 21) is disappointingly insensitive to gender. Of the 8+ references to the integration of gender considerations in the operative parts of the earlier versions of the draft agreement (including in finance, technology and mitigation approaches), only 2 explicit references to "gender-responsive" approaches were included in the final agreement – in the sections on adaptation and capacity-building. While critically important, these reinforce the notion of women as climate change victims in need of support to strengthen their resilience. They do not acknowledge women's capabilities as local leaders – given appropriate financial and technological support – to address climate change and provide community-driven solutions.

To bring greater visibility to the importance of gender we need to better understand how different groups of women and men can adapt to change in terms of their rights, access to resources, divisions of work, and social norms and expectations. We need to recognise that, across places and groups, different strategies and a diversity of adaptation practices exist.

In this brief, drawing on examples from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia, we detail how gender is or isn't an integral element of adaptation practices and policies, and offer recommendations for how greater inclusion can be achieved.

Gender and adaptation practices: key lessons from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia

Lesson 1: Within the policy domain, gender is hardly addressed, and if it is, there is typically reference only to women and as a homogenous category, with no reflection on possible differences based on social location of class and ethnicity, or geographical and agro-ecological contexts. However, such differences can be stark.

Key example: In the context of changing seasonal patterns of temperature and rainfall in Ahmednagar in Maharashtra State, western India, a striking difference exists in both the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of households with seasonally irrigated land, those dependent entirely on rainfed farming, and landless labourers Mhaskar (2010). The landless shift to non-farm labouring work outside the village (e.g., in brick kilns), and households with irrigation often shift their work patterns due to the adoption of short-duration crops. However, workloads are greatest for women in rainfed farming households due to fluctuating crop yields, and longer distances to travel for fuel, fodder and water for their livestock – with adverse health consequences.

Lesson 2: While development organisations are increasingly paying attention to social differentiation amongst women, climate change adaptation policies intended to address gender do not explicitly discuss male activities and contributions – or indeed their absence. Yet, for targeted and equitable policy making, it is important to identify those most vulnerable based on a range of socio-demographic variables including gender, class, education, access to assets and social networks.

Key example: At the local level, it is not only women who are disconnected from the policy making discourse. While some men may be present in decision-making roles, men are generally portrayed as lazy, or choosing to leave agricultural and rural areas, with no apparent responsibility towards their family and community. This unhelpful generalisation fails to address potential male vulnerabilities, and diminishes men's responsibility towards their household's survival and livelihood security. Indeed, Indian men migrating for survival due to climate and livelihood shocks often end up in urban slums, working hard in poor living and working conditions, developing a range of health problems that may in fact enhance male morbidity and mortality in the medium term (Mitra et al., 2015).

Lesson 3: In the context of climate change, along with shifting economic policies and growing political uncertainties, it is important

to consider adaptation in a more holistic way, to include changes at multiple levels, and across different domains (climate, political, ecological, economic, social). Non-climatic development drivers, including structural inequalities, heavily influence the severity with which extreme climate events impact particular groups and individuals (Tschakert et al., 2013). It is critical to identify and articulate these broader drivers to adequately assess current and future vulnerability to climate.

Key example: The semi-arid region of Ghana has the highest incidence of extreme poverty in the country, driven by the interaction of colonial and postcolonial neglect, high levels of climate variability and severe droughts (Rademacher-Schulz et al., 2014). Furthermore, the current emphasis on agricultural intensification and liberalisation favours large-scale developments and reinforces radical land fragmentation, land grabbing and marginalisation of smallholder farmers (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr, 2015). Smallholders' strategies to cope with these changes are diverse, ranging from migration and remittances, dry season farming, use of improved crop varieties, livestock maintenance, to social networking and even skipping meals (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr, 2015; Rademacher-Schulz et al., 2014; Wossen and Berger, 2015). If adaptation responses recognise the effects that non-climatic elements have on vulnerability, then they can more holistically and effectively reduce negative impacts.

Lesson 4: In a context of cutbacks in state welfare measures, people are increasingly dependent on household incomes and kin-groups for survival. Strategies that enhance cooperation, provide opportunities to both women and men, and renegotiate gender roles and responsibilities in more equal ways, are important.

Key example: In Bobirwa, Botswana, subsistence farmers (mainly women) have limited options for alternative livelihoods, and are vulnerable to drought and water scarcity – closely linked to crop failure, infertile soils and poor animal health. When managing household food and nutrition security becomes a challenge, they can become dependent on handouts and food baskets. Supplementary feeding and welfare days provided by public health facilities create an additional demand on their time. Modern farming methods based on drought-resistant crop varieties and groundwater irrigation have been proposed as a solution to crop failures. However, these methods are expensive and usually used commercially by men who have the means to own larger farms. As a result, traditional labour and livestock-sharing practices have also declined, with commercial farmers using government subsidies and packages rather than reciprocal arrangements with women.

Lesson 5: Critical information on different types of adaptation strategies – that are both productive and replicable – needs to be accessible to both men and women.

Key example: In Kenya, through their collectives, widows and divorced women affected by HIV and AIDS – some of the most marginalised groups in the locality – are able to invest in sustainable innovations like rainwater harvesting and agroforestry to address growing livelihood and water stresses (Gabrielsson and Ramasar, 2013).

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