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## **Climate change is a critical issue for all of us: Engendering climate change work**

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*When women benefit, the whole community benefits.*

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## Climate change is a critical issue for all of us: Engendering climate change work

Climate change is never far from the news these days. Peaks of activity around major new reports build on a background of frequent climate-related references. But you have to look hard to find serious consideration of the gender impacts of climate change.

Climate change is a global issue that will impact everyone. **But its effects won't be felt equally** – people in developing countries will be hardest hit, and those most affected will be the poor who have few resources to draw on and live day to day, particularly if drought or increased natural disasters reduce their ability to grow food and maintain shelter. Developing countries are also the first to be affected by climate change. This is not a prediction for the future – it is happening already, with as rising sea levels forcing relocation in low-lying Pacific islands and increasingly frequent extreme weather events threatening food production and viable livelihoods in many parts of the developing world.

Women make up some 70% of the world's poor, with less power and less access to and control over resources than men in virtually every society. **This inequality is likely to exacerbate the impacts of adverse climatic change and the demands of adaptation.** But you wouldn't know this from mainstream media or from listening to most scientists or economists.

In most cultures and societies, women and men have particular roles and responsibilities. While these are not universal and they can and do change over time and between societies, in many cultures, women play a major role in providing their family's basic needs. Women and girls often have primary responsibility for growing food, caring for livestock, collecting water and fuel. So if water or fuel become more scarce and women and girls have to spend longer walking to collect it, they will have less time for school, or for employment, or for participating in community activities.

Women are also particularly vulnerable in natural disasters. In the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami they were four times more likely to die than men – for a range of reasons that are closely linked to cultural attitudes and women's roles. Women are more likely to be caught in their homes with young children and find it difficult to flee. They may try to save children, hampering their ability to escape. They are less likely to be able to swim. Cultural expectations may make it difficult for women to leave home without a male escort. Clothing may restrict movement. In Sri Lanka there were stories of women's saris becoming entangled in branches during the tsunami. Rohini Weerasingha, Executive Director of IWDA's partner organisation in Sri Lanka, Kantha Shakthi, tells of women whose clothing was removed by the force of the water but who felt unable to allow men to rescue them, so strong was the sense of shame associated with public nakedness.

Women also face particular barriers to rebuilding after natural disasters. They have less access to resources, including land, which in many developing countries is more likely to be in the name of the male in the family. In most developing countries, women usually complete fewer years of schooling than men, affecting their ability to earn income and rebuild. Women are also generally the primary caregivers within families, constraining their ability to take paid employment.

### Effective responses need to recognise women's and men's knowledge and roles

But women's roles in communities also provide them with significant knowledge about climate patterns and the condition and uses of local natural resources including water. So they have much to contribute to analysis of how the climate is changing and the impacts of this, to planning strategies that mitigate impact, and to promoting and mobilising behaviour change, including through educating the next generation. **Quite aside from democratic and representation arguments, women's involvement is key to the grassroots 'bottom-up' change required for economic, social and cultural transformation.**

*When women benefit, the whole community benefits.*

So it is critical that our thinking and action on climate change recognises that men and women will be differently affected – because their economic and social circumstances, roles and responsibilities, access to and control over resources are different. For policy responses to be effective and efficient, men’s and women’s different needs, interests, ways of working and contributions must be reflected in research, policy and planning. And both women and men need to be part of decision making about how best to prevent, mitigate and manage the effects of adverse climate change. The gendered impacts of climate change are not an optional extra – they need to be formally incorporated in the thinking and planning of governments and organisations at all levels.

This is not a new discussion. In the lead up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio in 1992, women mobilised nationally and internationally to ensure that the myriad ways in which women’s lives intersect with the environment were acknowledged and taken into account. I had the opportunity to draft the Australian Government’s statement on women and environment for UNCED<sup>1</sup> and participate with hundreds of other women at preparatory conferences such as the World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet. Concerted advocacy and analysis by women’s units in government and non-government organisations such as the Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) finally saw gender issues included on the agenda at UNCED.

**But the fact that we are having the same discussions today tells us that gender issues - and women’s voices - are still not a routine part of policy discussions, negotiations and planning for adaptation and mitigation.** A gendered analysis is generally neglected in favour of ostensibly more ‘universal issues’, on the assumption that this will benefit everyone. Planning the structural shifts required in our economy has to date taken little account of the different impacts on women and men, their different perspectives about environmental risk and how these can contribute to tackling the issues we face as a community. Women’s voices are too often at the margins of major policy discussions and negotiations. This has negative effects on gender equality and on the efficiency and effectiveness of negotiation processes and the outcomes achieved.<sup>2</sup>

Gender needs to be integrated into all mitigation and adaptation policies, so that gender analysis of commitments and mechanisms is embedded at a process level. Further research on the gendered impacts of climate change is essential if policy interventions are to be effective. If we proactively identify and promote new technologies that are accessible and acceptable to women, and enable women to lead in provision and support, then bringing about the structural changes in our economies required to address climate change will also progress gender equality.

#### Mobilising community planning and action: Carteret Islands, Papua New Guinea

**There is a pressing need for gendered analysis and policy making, and for pathways that enable women’s voices to be heard in discussions.** In the Asia-Pacific region, women’s ability to draw their livelihoods from fishing and agriculture is threatened by global warming, undermining the ability of communities to sustain themselves in place. We are already seeing communities planning to leave low-lying islands. For them, adverse climate change is very real. Ursula Rakova, along with some 3000 others, lives on the Carteret Islands, small atolls off the coast of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Land is passed from mother to daughter in the Carterets, and this matrilineal link to land powerfully shapes women’s identity.

When Ursula was a girl she was able to walk from one side of her island to the other and people were able to visit each other using small open boats. The main staple was a mangrove taro they cultivated. In recent years things have changed dramatically. Global warming and climate change have resulted in higher sea levels. Ursula’s home island has been divided into two islands and must

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<sup>1</sup> As a staff member of the Commonwealth Government’s Office for the Status of Women.

<sup>2</sup> See, for ex., Dennison, Christie E. (2003), ‘From Beijing to Kyoto: Gendering the International Climate Change Negotiation Process’, paper presented to 53rd Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, *Advancing Human Security: The Role of Technology and Politics*, Halifax and Pugwash, Nova Scotia, Canada, July 17-21, <http://www.pugwash.org/reports/pac/53/dennison.htm>

be crossed by boat. The tides and currents have become more powerful and erratic, resulting in more severe storm surges. It is now simply too dangerous for a large part of the year for community members to visit neighbours on other islands in the group, or to venture further out from the shore to fish. The salinity of the island's water has also increased and the community can no longer grow their staple food, mangrove taro.

Ursula's community is living with the reality of climate change. A significant proportion of the community will have to move from the land that is at the heart of their culture because it can no longer sustain the same number of people. They are among the first climate refugees. For Ursula and other women, the challenge involves more than coping with displacement from their traditional lands and way of life. Their family and caring roles put them at the heart of planning how to meet basic needs and keep communities together at a time of profound dislocation.

IWDA, along with a number of other NGOs, is supporting Ursula's organisation, Tulele Peseia, so that it can plan for moving a substantial proportion of the community off the islands to mainland Bougainville and assist the community to adjust, preserve their culture and establish new livelihoods, while also highlighting the impacts of climate change, including in international fora. The fact that Tulele Peisa struggles for funding tells us much about the extent of the challenge facing women in the Pacific seeking to lead community-based responses to climate change.

Ursula's story also reminds us that **climate change should not be framed merely as a debate about science or education or economic adjustment. It is about people, habitat, heritage, culture and ways of life. It is about who has voice to influence decisions, and who has access to resources.**

### Addressing the gender deficit

Despite women's right to participate and be heard, their direct interest in sustainable environmental management and mitigation of natural disasters, their specific knowledge and their particular vulnerabilities, and their ability to enable behaviour change, they are significantly under-represented in decision-making fora regarding climate change. If policy is to be informed and inclusive, organisations and governments need to incorporate gender analysis and provide pathways that allow women to contribute their concerns, needs and experiences.

Climate change is already transforming the lives of women. Women are working to counter the effects of climate change, and adapt to a changing climate despite limited information and resources<sup>3</sup>. How much more could be achieved if women were fully involved at all levels in climate change processes and negotiations, in assessing local priorities and planning for and implementing adaptation and mitigation policies and processes.

Women, like men, will have practical needs associated with climate change – such as geographic and sector-specific information, training in crop diversification and alternative livelihoods, and access to information and resources, to services and support. But perhaps more than anything, women need to be systematically considered and taken into account.

Women, as the majority of the poor, and because of socially determined role and responsibilities, face particular risks in disasters. Not only environmental catastrophe such as tsunamis, but also drought, deforestation and erratic rainfall impact on women's ability to live and earn. Women also have important contributions to make to livelihood adaptation strategies.

Gender inequality will shape the impacts of climate change. Equally, how we respond to the challenge can challenge prevailing inequalities. The policy decisions we make and the approaches

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<sup>3</sup> Studies indicate that women have an information deficit on climate politics and protection. See, for ex, Röhr, Ulrike (2005), 'Gender and Climate Change – a Forgotten Issue?' Tiempo Climate Newswatch, July 11, [http://www.tiempocyperclimate.org/newswatch/xp\\_comment050711.htm](http://www.tiempocyperclimate.org/newswatch/xp_comment050711.htm)

taken in addressing climate change have the potential to contribute to a dual transformation – of productive processes and gender inequality - **if they enable women to be part of the decision-making, and to access and control new environmentally sound technologies and technical knowledge.**

IWDA is privileged to work with some amazing women on the front line of dealing with the affects of climate change. There is much to support, and much to learn.