

## **Climate Change is not gender-neutral: realities on the ground.<sup>1</sup>**

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Climate change is often considered as a technical and political problem, that manifests itself at international level. The human face of climatic changes is neglected. People and their societies determine to a large extent how presently the climate develops itself and changes. Climatic changes manifest themselves at local level. And changes in the climate contribute to an increase in existing social inequalities.

### **Introduction**

*“I have seven children. [...] Our house is collapsed because of the floods, and our crops – maize and sorghum – are destroyed. Hunger stares us in the eyes.”* Mrs. Atibzel Abaande, 45 year, Bawku West District, Ghana .

For billions of women and girls in this world there are less possibilities, opportunities and certainties than for many men. More and more we see that changes in biodiversity, environment and climate have an increasing effect on such gender inequalities. On the other hand: if women and girls get opportunities, they have proved to be important actors on the way to a more sustainable and just society.

### **Social consequences of climate change**

Many people have difficulty in sustain their lives and survive in more extreme and less predictable circumstances. Long-lasting droughts, but also floods and sea-level rise threaten the availability and quality of drinking-water and water for agriculture and other purposes. Energy supply, particularly for the more than 2 billion people that depend on fuel and other biomass, becomes more problematic. And the number of locations that are not safe because of natural disasters is increasing dramatically.

The security of many communities in the world is threatened seriously: a safe habitat, food- and water-security, as well as energy security are at stake. Also health is being affected – that occurs due to environmental disasters and indirectly through the deteriorating living- and food conditions. There is scarcity of safe water and an increase in disease-carrying vectors, that cause strong increases in malaria and dengue fever. Dr. Andrew Githeko, a prominent malaria-researcher from the Kenya Medical Research Institute in 2010: *‘It is clear now that increases in temperature in the city of Nairobi have caused an increase of the quantity of malaria parasites and mosquito’s.’* (Gitigo Njeru, 2010).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) mentioned in its Fourth Assessment Report of 2007: *“Particularly poor communities, living in very high risk areas, are vulnerable. They have a more limited capacity to adapt and are more dependent on climate sensitive resources such as water and locally produced food”*.

The vulnerability and capacity of individuals and communities to cope with or adapt to climatic changes is related to the access to and control of natural, social, physical, political and financial resources. Particularly people that live in poverty or are marginalized, such as

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women, children, elderly persons, and people living with a disability, suffer from climatic changes.

### **Climate change increases gender inequalities**

One of the most persistent inequalities in the world is the – socially constructed – inequality between women and men. This notwithstanding the progress that has been made over the past years in achieving Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 – on gender equality and women’s empowerment. This is mainly caused by the progress in girls’ access to education. Globally, also in the Netherlands and other European countries, there are still differences between women’s and men’s positions, opportunities and rights.

Climate change is not gender-neutral! Particularly women are the ones who are hardest hit when they meet with the changes in the access and quality of natural resources. If there is no clean drinking-water or fuel close to home, you have to walk longer often over rough terrain. If there is less food, and you are the last in the family to eat, there will be left over for you. The often poorer health of women comes under high pressure. They are often exposed to polluting substances of inferior fuels. And the fact that the body carries the care of the reproduction, make women extra sensitive during and after pregnancies, especially for malaria.

The interface between the living environment (the ecosphere) and human society (sociosphere) – where gender-relations manifest themselves – becomes extra evident when climatic changes occur. Agricultural production come under pressure, clear water and (biomass)energy become scarcer, heat stress and illnesses increase, and climate related disasters became more frequent. The burdens and stress factors of women become larger, they get less opportunities through education and training, and often an increase in violence occurs.

A well known study of the London School of Economics a.o. (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007) that analyzed 141 natural disasters that occurred during the period 1981 to 2002, showed that the chance that women survive is significantly smaller than that of men. The stronger the disaster, the larger this effect; and the bigger the gender inequality, the larger the gender-differentiated impact. There are also some situations in which more male victims occur, but these are much more limited.

There are similar situations everywhere: during the 2004 tsunami in Bandah Aceh, Indonesia, women formed 55 to 70% of the victims. If women who life in poverty lose their livelihood, they threaten to slip down into greater poverty. The hurricane Katrina in the southern Gulf-states Louisiana and Mississippi of the United States contributed to the fact that particularly single women of Anglo-African descent, who belong to the most backward groups, are hardest hit.

It is also important to mention ‘*inter-sectionality*’: not only gender, but also the combination with ethnicity, age and socio-economic background, determine to a large extent the vulnerability for climatic changes and people’s resilience (Harris, 2010).

A warning is important. Also in these circumstances women are not just victims. Almost everywhere where slow-unset or sudden disasters hit, women came together to organize themselves. They are the activists and leaders in the combating of climatic problems, in disaster risk management and in recovery. There are many examples that show how women became active in climate action and/or in adapting to changing climatic situation.

I would like to share this example with you. Sahena Begun lives in the village Kundertar in Bangladesh, that is impacted by often stronger flooding. But she does not feel like a victim: *'We are not born to suffer: we are born to fight'*, says she. Against the will of her family Sahena Begun, a young woman who could not finish school, participated in a training on disaster risk management, and she was elected as chairperson of the local disaster committee, that consists of only women. She teaches the women in the village to be prepared for the moment that a disaster occurs. The women make portable stoves from clay, and together with dry firewood put these at a high level in the house. They save seeds for after the floods, and build their houses on higher locations. The women in the village are now well prepared for another natural disaster, even if they become more frequent and intense. (From: Oxfam-GB, 2009, Sisters on the Planet (DVD)).

### **Who leaves his ground?**

The relationship between environmental degradation and migration is often complex. However, the Dutch newspaper Trouw mentioned: *'50 million "environmental refugees" around 2020'* (Trouw, 22 February 2011). The article was published on the occasion of the Congress of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), during which Cristina Tirado of the University of California mentioned: *'If people have to live in circumstances that can not be sustained, than they migrate'*.

William Lacy Swing, director-general of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), says it as follows: *'The impacts of climatic changes on migration form a major challenge for humanity. The number of storms, droughts and floods has increased threefold over the past 30 years, such as the devastating effects on crucial communities, especially in developing countries. In 2008, 20 million people were flying for extreme weather events, whereas there are 4.6 million internally refugees caused by conflicts and violence in that year [...]'* (Swing, in: Laczko and Aghazarm, 2009, blz. 5-6). He warns for the misunderstanding: although extreme weather circumstances such as storms, cyclones and tornado's get most attention in the media, in future it will be the slow-onset climatic changes, such as temperature increases and droughts, that will cause most severe problems.

Also in the context there is a difference between women and men. Naik (2009) concludes that many women react to natural disasters by mobilizing social networks in their community, while men feel inclined to get away, looking for work and for another residence. Often again, she ascertains, you see men that migrate and women that stay behind. That has both positive and negative effects for women: they become *de facto* heads of households, that gives them more power; on the other side you see that they become overburdened by the extension of their tasks. If women migrate, they also [lopen] extra risks. A recent study of PLAN UK/International (2011) shows that adolescent girls in Bangladesh en Ethiopia, because of deteriorating living conditions caused by droughts and flooding, are forced into early marriages and also in prostitution.

### **Female and male lifestyles**

One other relevant aspect in this respect is the question how women and men contribute differently to climate change. A few recent European studies show that male behavior contributes more to global warming. The study of Gerd Johnsson-Latham (2007) from Sweden shows that women live in a more sustainable way and have smaller ecological footprints. Similar conclusions are drawn by Annika Carlsson-Kanyama (Sweden) and Riita Rätty (Finland). They studied the lifestyles of men and women during ten daily activities in

Germany, Greece, Norway and Sweden. They concluded for example that men used more meat than women and that they drive their cars over longer distance. Such activities could result into higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. (IPS, 2011) Also in such cases socially constructed roles are important determining factors.

### **Finally**

I have tried to show you that the social dimensions of climatic changes, and in particular its gender dimensions, need immediate attention. It is important that experts and politicians acknowledge that climate change is not only a technical and political, but also a social problem. And that they give specific attention to the most vulnerable groups in their research, policies, programmes and projects, that they compensate these groups for climate related damages and guarantee security. This is only possible if apart from men also women, apart from adults also children, apart from wealthy people also those living in poverty and refugees and migrants are heard and involved in planning and implementation of policies. Because it is in their voices that the reality of a changing climate can be understood.

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