

**Enhancing Women's Reproductive Rights in an era of Climate Change.  
Gender, Climate Change and Human Security: lessons for population policies  
Paper presented at the EuroNGOs conference in Lyon, 2 October 2008.**

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*In my presentation I would like to introduce to you a study on 'Gender, Climate Change and Human Security', which the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) has executed recently in partnership with organizations in Senegal, Ghana, and Bangladesh ( commissioned by the Greece chairmanship of the Human Security Network and facilitated by ELIAMEP)<sup>1</sup>. The report includes general analyses and information, case studies from the three countries mentioned, as well as policy recommendations. Moreover, I would like to explore with you lessons from our study for population policies in general and women's reproductive rights in particular.*

**Women and Climate Change**

There is no doubt that climate change manifests itself already extensively in many regions of the world, and that it forms a major threat for the wellbeing of humans, biodiversity and ecosystems everywhere. Although climate change affects everyone, it is not gender neutral. Climatic changes magnify existing crises, conflicts and inequalities, reinforcing the disparity between women and men in their vulnerability and capability to cope with climate change (UNDP, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2007).

Generally speaking, women, as the majority of the world's poor, are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change (WEDO, 2007). Not only are women more likely to become direct victims of climate change disasters, such as hurricanes and flooding, but when they lose their livelihoods, they often slip deeper into poverty, inequality and marginalization. Therefore, climate change presents a serious threat to their personal security.

In this context, valuable lessons can be learned from the gender-specific documentation of the implications of natural disasters. In a recent study by the London School of Economics, the University of Essex and the Max-Planck Institute of Economics, a sample of 141 countries in which natural disasters occurred during the period 1981-2002 was analyzed (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007). One of the main findings was that natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than that of men, and as the disaster intensifies, so too does this effect. In general, women have less access to resources that are essential in disaster preparedness, mitigation and rehabilitation. Women also face indirect problems when natural disasters strike; they are often less informed, less mobile, more likely to be confined to the house and have less decision-making power (UNFCCC, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), 2008. *Gender, Climate Change, and Human Security*. WEDO, New York. (commissioned by the Greece Chairmanship (2007-2008) of the Human Security Network. (authors: Irene Dankelman, Khurshid Alam, Wahida Bashir Ahmed, Yacine Diagne Gueye, Naureen Fatema and Rose Mensah-Kutin )  
(see: [www.wedo.org/files/HSN%20Study%20Final%20May%202020,%202008.pdf](http://www.wedo.org/files/HSN%20Study%20Final%20May%202020,%202008.pdf) )

Sometimes however, the hazards arising from climate change and natural disasters impact more seriously on men. In the floods that swamped the US in June 2008, at least 12 people were killed, of which 9 were men.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, immediate mortality caused by hurricane Mitch in Central America was higher for men (Bradshaw, 2004). Most of the deaths during these hazards occurred outside of the home, where men are more likely to be. Empirical studies also reveal that women and men make decisions differently: whereas men are more risk-taking and overconfident, women tend to be more risk averse (Brown-Kruse, 1993; Patt et al, 2007).

Overall, however, women's multiple responsibilities in the family make them particularly vulnerable to environmental change, which is exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. They are being affected in their multiple roles as food producers and food providers, as guardians of family health, care givers and economic actors. As access to basic assets and natural resources, such as shelter, food, fertile land, clean water and fuel becomes hampered, women's workload increases. Poor families, including many female-headed households, often live in precarious situations, e.g. on low lands, along dangerous riverbanks, or on steep slopes. Drought, loss of vegetation, and erratic rainfall cause women to work harder to secure (natural) resources and livelihoods. In such situations, they have less time to get an education or training, earn income, or participate in governing bodies. If resources become scarce, girls regularly drop out of school to help their mothers to gather fuel and water.

Conflict that arises from a shortage of natural resources and safe livelihoods amplifies existing gender inequalities, while the relocation of people has severe impacts on social support networks, and family ties – mechanisms that have a crucial value for women, for example in their coping capacity (Patt et al., 2007).

### **Women's coping strategies**

Too often women are primarily perceived as victims of climatic changes and not as positive agents of change and contributors to livelihood adaptation strategies. As highlighted by Enarson (2000) and O'Brien (2007), natural disasters could also provide women with a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society. In general, women have proved effective in mobilizing the community to respond to disasters - in both disaster preparedness and mitigation. However, they also face specific challenges: usually women have fewer assets than men to recover from natural disasters, and generally they don't own land which could be sold to secure income in an emergency. Nevertheless, women worldwide are starting to adapt to a changing climate, and are articulating what they need to secure and sustain their livelihoods more effectively, as well as what they need to better adapt. Local strategies for coping with and adapting to climate change provide valuable lessons, for policymaking and development work.

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<sup>2</sup> Amanda Ripley, June 24, 2008. Why More Men Die in Floods. In: *TIME* (<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1817603,00.html> ; seen 18 Sept.2008)

Among the priorities women identify in times of disaster are: a safe place for their families and themselves; adaptation of agricultural practices; better access to information; access to services, such as doctors and agricultural extension; development of their capacities; access to resources, including climate-related finances (Skutsch, 2004); and ecological restoration.

In the framework presented in our study we define human security as security of survival, security of livelihood and human dignity (including basic human rights, capacity and participation). Climate change has different effects on these respective security aspects, with gender-specific implications. In each of these areas, women have developed adaptive strategies to cope with these problems. These include: moving to safer places or walking further to access livelihood resources, adapting agricultural practices (e.g. switching to other crops and practices), saving assets (e.g. seeds and livestock), dietary adaptations (e.g. cooking meals that need less energy), the use of energy- or water saving technologies, earning extra income (e.g. working as wage laborers, or borrowing money from money lenders), the application of alternative health care, incl. the use of traditional medicines, and organizing and collective action. Not all coping strategies are sustainable; for example adaptations in diets, or money lending, can threaten the family's health and deepen poverty. However, women often have a clear idea of what they need to adapt better to climate change: safety, better access to information, agricultural support, access to services (including medical services), access to resources (e.g. climate-related finances), credits and markets, development of their capacities (e.g. training), and ecological restoration.

Based on these needs, there is a wide range of policy opportunities in which adaptive measures can be taken to address not only men's, but also women's priorities in times of climate change.

### **Policy lessons**

Although there is a wide range of international agreements that aim to secure human rights and human security, gender equality and sustainable development, a gender approach is generally lacking in climate change agreements, negotiations and international and national mitigation and adaptation measures. Not only must global and national climate change policies, programs, funds and budgets include a gender perspective, the institutional capacity to mainstream gender in global and national climate change policies and operations should also be enhanced. Additionally, there is a need to address climate change in discussions on women's rights and related interventions (Alam et al., 2008).

Policies intended to adapt to climate change should build on and strengthen women's experiences, knowledge and coping strategies. The organization of women and their coalitions and networks at community, national and international levels should be supported to ensure that recovery and adaptation measures respond to women's needs and concerns. Moreover, community-based preparedness and response plans should take women's social, economic, physical and psychological vulnerabilities into account to reduce the impact of climate change and natural disasters, and make responses more effective.

### **Lessons for population policies and women's reproductive rights**

What does the study learn us about the focus of this conference: “*The Interface between Population, Environment and Poverty Alleviation*”? Population dynamics are important drivers for the demand and use of natural resources, for waste generation and the emission of polluting substances, including greenhouse gases. It is a clear fact that the world population has more than doubled since I was born: we walk on this globe with many more feet. But not only the number of people, also our ecological footprint (including the technologies we use), are important determinants for our contributions to environmental change. In this context, it is useful to mention that several studies have shown that women make decisions regarding ‘consumption and production’ differently from men. In general there is a tendency amongst women to choose for more healthy and sustainable products and technologies. This might be linked to women's higher risk perception. Studies from various European countries show that women consume not only less energy than men, but that also in their choice for energy saving measures, men tend to trust on technical solutions while women rather tend to opt for behavioral or lifestyle changes.<sup>3</sup> A report from the Swedish Ministry of Sustainable Development on lifestyles, consumption patterns, sustainable development, indicates that generally speaking women's footprint is smaller than that of men, and that men's lifestyles and consumer patterns are more resource-intensive and less sustainable (Johnson-Latham, 2006). These outcomes immediately raise new questions, such as what the reasons behind such differences are.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, 1994, places women's rights, health and empowerment at the center of efforts for human rights and sustainable development. A strong correlation between the enhancement of women's rights and their status in society, and population (growth) rates, was acknowledged. If we want to tackle the need for balancing the world population and the carrying capacity of the Earth, one of the major prerequisites is women's empowerment and respect for their human rights, including their livelihood rights. It also gives rise to an important ethical issue: should women therefore be considered as key agents for transitions towards more sustainable lifestyles or is that a too instrumental view?

Looking specifically at the interface between climate change, population and gender, some immediate issues arise. Climate change will certainly exacerbate migration and the number of environmental refugees. In the aftermath of disasters or during crises, women and girls, in particular, are vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Prostitution, incl. forced prostitution, and forced marriages are on the increase when disasters hit and livelihoods collapse.

Important lessons can be learned from disaster literature regarding the respect (or disrespect) of women's reproductive rights in times of disaster. These could also be applied for situations of sudden or more slow climatic change: women living in camps or temporary refugee centers that do not have access to safe sanitation, reproductive health

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<sup>3</sup> See: [www.gendercc.net](http://www.gendercc.net)

services and tools. After the tsunami hit communities in South Asia, many women in the camps lacked access to reproductive health services, contraceptives and to menstruation materials. Water scarcity or lack of safe sanitation facilities, make it difficult for women and girls to use toilets when they have their periods, putting their privacy and dignity at stake.

Pregnant and lactating women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Not only form the increasing incidences of malaria a direct threat to their health and that of their (unborn) children through severe anaemia – pregnant women are twice as attractive for malaria carrying mosquito's than non-pregnant women-, also other vector-borne and infectious diseases might form an extra threat in climate change situations. Extreme heat events are especially threatening for pregnant women, because of women's susceptibility to extreme temperatures. There are significant qualitative and quantitative differences in women's and men's responses to extreme temperatures.

Apart from these health effects in times of climatic changes, women's caring tasks for the sick, particularly for those who are effected by malaria or HIV/Aids, are much more difficult to fulfill, when water and other resources become scarce or polluted.

Finally, in the efforts to mitigate climate change, technology choices are on the agenda that form potential threats to women's reproductive health. This is an issue that needs all attention in the upcoming push for more nuclear energy. Experiences from, for example, Eastern Europe, shows that this is at least a questionable development. Similarly the promotion of biofuels has to be critically assessed from a women's (reproductive) rights perspective.

### **Conclusion**

In this presentation I have tried to link the outcomes of our study on human security, climate change and gender to the focus of this conference: population, environment and poverty. It is clear that in order to understand the impacts of climate change on communities and people, it is needed to differentiate between women and men. Apart from gender differences, other social differentiators, including levels of poverty, should be taken into account. Women and men do play different roles in mitigating climate change, in building resilience and in coping with and adapting to climatic changes. Their respective roles and contributions in these areas need to be enhanced and supported.

It is clear that environmental change forms a major challenge for population policies. In order to secure women's (reproductive) rights in this era of climatic changes, a gender approach and alignment with women's reproductive needs and rights, is essential. We are just starting to explore all these linkages: much more is needed – not only in theory, but certainly also in the reality of people's lives. Only through such a holistic approach, all aspects of human security of women and men, boys and girls, - security of survival, security of livelihood, their dignity and human rights -, can be safeguarded.

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