

Coping with climate change: what works for women?

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1. Why do climate change impacts particularly affect poor women in developing countries?

In every society, women and men have different roles inside and outside the household, and different resources to deliver them. In the rural communities of developing countries where Oxfam works, men's roles typically focus on earning cash, by growing food, trading, or selling their labour. But it is largely the role of women to provide the food, fuel, water, and care that the family needs (all for no pay), in addition to earning some cash. In such communities, women are likely to have:

- greater reliance on natural resources – like rivers, wells, reliable rainfall, and forests
- fewer physical resources – such as land, fertilizer or irrigation, and fewer assets (like machinery, or a bicycle) to use to make money, or to sell as a last resort
- fewer financial resources – little cash, savings or access to credit, and less access to markets that give a good price for their goods
- less powerful social resources – due to social and cultural norms that limit their mobility and their voice in decision-making, reinforce traditional roles, and put them at risk of violence
- fewer human resources – due to having less education, fewer opportunities for training, and less access to official information.

Climate change – bringing higher temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, sea-level rise, and more droughts, floods and storms – raises the pressure on women in delivering these daily essentials. But it also undermines the natural resources that they rely upon to do it. And with few alternative resources to turn to, women may be forced to cope with climate impacts in extreme ways.

As sea levels rise and hurricanes become more intense, for example, flooding and wind damage is becoming more common in many coastal communities. During floods women - like men - lose their crops, their belongings, and their ways of earning cash. But as the whole community tries to recover, women have to spend much more time each day fetching water, walking for hours to find wells that are not contaminated with salt water. Some of these women then face violence from their husbands, who don't accept their wives spending so much time far from home. In addition, drinking salty water causes high rates of miscarriage, premature birth, and stillbirth in pregnant women. And as a family's ability to feed itself deteriorates, women tend to be the first to eat less, to ensure that the men and boys get enough.

Worse still, there is growing evidence that a higher proportion of women than men are injured or killed during hurricanes and floods. Why? Because women are less likely to hear official warnings, less likely to be able to swim, and less able to escape fast, especially if they are carrying young children, or (in some cultures) if they feel they should not leave their homes unaccompanied by male family members. And if flood and cyclone shelters are not designed with women's interests in mind – such as providing separate toilets and sleeping areas – women are less likely to seek refuge in them. It is clearly essential to put women at the heart of adapting to climate impacts in order to avoid such development disasters.

2. What can be done to support women in adapting to climate change?

Women may be particularly vulnerable to climate impacts, but they are also the key to adapting to the new climate reality because of their knowledge and use of natural resources. With women at the heart of adaptation, the whole community will become more resilient, as the following examples show.

Fuel-efficient stoves in Uganda: saving time, saving trees, and building resilience.

In the Rwenzori region of Uganda, it is largely the work of women and girls to gather firewood for cooking. They have to walk further every year, since all the trees near their villages have now been cut. This takes precious time from their days: for girls, lost opportunities of schooling; for women, less time to earn cash or take

part in community decision-making. And it degrades the local environment, with the steep hillsides losing their soil, resulting in landslides, so making the whole community more vulnerable to the coming extremes of heat and rainfall.

Oxfam is working with local organizations in Rwenzori to encourage women to use fuel-efficient cooking stoves. These 'Lorena' stoves use less fuel (so require less wood each day) and have chimneys, so protect women's lungs from the dense smoke that used to fill their homes. For women, the result is more time and better health. They can now learn how to grow crops that will survive in extremes of heat or rainfall, and how to earn cash in new ways, off the farm – both essential adjustments for building their resilience to coming climate change. The environmental result is beneficial too: with fewer trees being cut, and with local women's groups now planting new trees, and learning how to conserve soil and retain rainfall, the villages and their surrounding land will be less exposed to climatic extremes.

Rearing ducks in Bangladesh: women deciding how to adapt to more flooding

Bangladesh will face more frequent and severe flooding due to climate change, so in the southwest of the country the development agency CARE has worked closely with local organizations to help communities – and especially women within them – to decide how best to adapt. The project focused on ensuring women could and would participate, by recruiting female staff, giving gender training to all staff, prioritizing female-headed households in the project, and organizing community meetings at times that fitted with women's daily workloads. The women were offered a range of options for diversifying their incomes: many chose to rear ducks. Why? Because starting up is low cost (and so low risk); it does not create a heavy workload in terms of time or labour; ducks produce eggs and meat for food or cash; and – unlike chickens – they can swim, so survive floods. As a result of the project, the women involved were no longer skipping meals during lean seasons, and most felt empowered by bringing cash into the home, finding they now had more say in household decisions. Rearing ducks has helped both to tackle gender inequalities, and to build the community's resilience to the flooding that they will inevitably face.

3. What policies are needed to ensure that women can adapt to climate change?

Oxfam is calling for adaptation policies at every level to be gender-sensitive so that they address both women's and men's needs and interests. Only this approach will be effective in building community-wide resilience to climate change, reducing gender inequalities, and so also promoting development. As a start:

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) must invest in and promote gender-focused climate-change research, and promote gender-disaggregated indicators for national reporting to the UNFCCC.
- Adaptation finance from rich and high-emission countries (such as the UK) must be channeled through international adaptation funds that are directed to the most vulnerable communities in developing countries, and through gender-sensitive programmes.
- Every country's national adaptation strategy should be designed to take account of the different impacts of climate change, and of climate policies, on women and men, prioritizing those in the most vulnerable communities.
- Local government and NGOs must ensure that community-based initiatives for adapting to climate change involve women at the heart of planning and implementation, so that both women's and men's concerns – their roles and resources – are taken into account.
- Women and women's organizations must have the space to participate actively, visibly, and as leaders, in climate-change negotiations and institutions - internationally, nationally and locally.