

e-discussion summary

Gender and Climate Change

October 2009

E-discussion, October 2009

The e-discussion on 'Gender and Climate Change' ran from 5 to 26 October 2009 facilitated by Asia Pacific Mountain Network (APMN). It attracted 130 contributions from a total of 407 registered participants. The e-discussion was initiated to provide input to the discussions taking place in the run up to and at the 15th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP-15) in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Contributions came from a diverse spectrum of participants including academics, development practitioners, researchers, and students, who shared their experiences, observations, perceptions, and opinions on gender, development, climate change, natural disasters, and planning to mitigate the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable people.

The discussants presented examples of how women are especially vulnerable to the many impacts of climate change from forests to water supply to livelihoods and health. They emphasised the need for the active participation of women and vulnerable people in planning aimed at mitigating these impacts.

Moderators: Brigitte Leduc, Tek Jung Mahat

Summaries: prepared by Frances Klatzel

Discussants: The names of the discussants, background papers, contributions and summaries can be accessed at <http://www.icimod.org/?page=555&>

The e-discussion on Gender and Climate Change in the Himalayas was initiated as the world's attention turns to changes in climate that may have consequences on natural resources and every aspect of health, food production, economic development, and our general wellbeing. Climate change in the Himalayas, the world's 'third pole', is affecting the lives of millions of people living upstream and downstream. Mountain people's livelihoods are affected by erratic rainfall, increased occurrence of droughts, and changing temperatures. As women and men generally play different roles in ensuring their livelihoods, their lives may be affected differently and they may play different roles in adapting to the changes.

The discussion aimed to learn how women and men may be affected differently by climate change. What do they do to respond to those stresses? How can we tap on mountain women and men's knowledge and capacities to support adaptation strategies to climate change? In brief, most participants agreed that both women and men are affected by climate change impacts but are vulnerable in different ways. They also both play an essential role in adapting to their changing environment; however, women's role and capacities are often overlooked. Mechanisms to support adaptation strategies must be gender sensitive in order to address the potentially differential needs of women and men and tap their respective knowledge and skills to make those strategies efficient and sustainable.

Women and men are vulnerable in different ways to disasters and the impacts of climate change

The negative effects of climate change have definitely affected both women and men, especially those living in poverty in developing countries. However, the participants generally agreed that women are affected more adversely by disasters and the impacts of climate change due to their essential roles in agricultural and household matters. When the men of households leave for wage labour and employment, the women must assume more responsibilities in addition to their traditional socioeconomic and cultural roles.

The participants described how as the climate changes, women are forced to go further for drinking water as water resources dry up and further to collect wood. Millions of people in areas suffering food scarcity may have to give up traditional crops, which could lead to social upheaval, mass migration, and conflict over water resources. These events could further increase the vulnerability of women to poverty and various forms of violence.

There is a need for more research backed by clear evidence of the greater effect of climate change on women. Although a range of methodological tool kits exist to describe how to assess vulnerability and the adaptive capacity of people to climate change, none specifically focusses on the gender dimension of climate change.

The participants generally agreed on the importance of research on the impacts on women of the Koshi flood in eastern Nepal, deforestation in Humla district and flooding in Kailali district of western Nepal, and the monsoon and cyclones in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This research could reveal the root causes of the impacts and thus indicate ways to mitigate the impacts of future flash floods, drought, melting ice, rising sea level, heat waves, and colder winters. The participants suggested that the concept of gender should be extended to look at the intersectionality with caste, ethnicity, class, age, and education.

Men migrate and women are left behind.....

"We are dependent on agriculture, which is totally dependent on good weather conditions. The biggest problem we face is food insecurity. If there was good weather, timely rain, and food security, we would never migrate. Why do we want to leave our family and travel to another place to work like animals?"

Moti Ram Khadka, VDC Secretary, Chheudi, Dailekh

Women's and men's assets – knowledge, skills, and capacities – can contribute to adaptation strategies

In response to the questions posed by the moderator, the participants described how the assets for adaptation to climate change are based on the understanding that the individual or collective has about their immediate environment and the potential impact the specific change would have.



For example, 'local' or 'traditional' knowledge is often extremely detailed and strong among remote, insular, or isolated communities; it is also crucial and critical for the sustenance and livelihood security of such remote communities. Mountain women have the knowledge to produce and preserve food for cold weather and to sustain life under such harsh conditions, but they are now searching for alternatives to increase their food security. They have the knowledge of agricultural crops, wild edibles, useful forest resources, seed selection and storage, weeds and weed management.

Social and economic factors may hinder women's and men's capacity to adapt to climate change impacts in the Himalayas

Climate changes are affecting human lives physically, psychologically, socioeconomically, and culturally due to the depletion of local sources of livelihood. Other factors include rapid population growth, poverty, improper use of natural resources, and unplanned and unsustainable development practices that have contributed to escalating the magnitude of risks. This stress on livelihoods erodes family stability and results in domestic violence and

criminal offences which are mostly committed against women or other vulnerable people.

The cultural norms and values of the Hindu Kush Himalayan regions have a strong influence on the capacities of women and men to adapt to climate change. As men are more able to move for employment and livelihoods, there has been a 'feminisation of agriculture' that has resulted in a 'feminisation of poverty' over the years.

As transformations take place, women's knowledge and skills are sometimes overlooked. It is essential, however, to safeguard, conserve, and build upon this rich knowledge base if effective adaptation strategies are to be formulated.

Gender issues in water resources are also contentious, and the impacts of climate change will no doubt exacerbate these issues. The adaptation capacity in water resources will only be achieved through a fully participatory approach at all levels, which includes women. A strong gender constituency is needed to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable will be heard when issues such as REDD and CDM are being discussed.



What happens when rain is delayed or doesn't come....

"We cannot give the same amount of food and variety to our children now, price of potatoes and beans have gone three times higher; we produced less than one fourth of crops than last year due to change in rainfall time; the land has become so hard that we can hardly do our weeding activity with bare hands; it requires triple the time and labour now; but we do not have any alternate tools to handle weeding."

Woman farmer near Kathmandu, Nepal, in a group interviewed by Kanchan Lama in 2009

Support to mountain people's adaptation strategies

The e-discussion concluded with a discussion of approaches for supporting mountain people's strategies to adapt to climate change from a gender perspective. The questions posed to the participants included:

1. What measures would support mountain people's capacity to adapt to climate change impacts?
2. How are the national climate change policies and strategies of the Himalayan countries addressing the different adaptation needs of women and men living in the mountains?
3. What else must government institutions do to effectively support climate change adaptation of mountain women and men?

A general theme at the root of many comments was that thus far, most approaches have been 'reactive' whereas, there is a need for integrated policies, strategies, practices, and adaptations to be 'proactive'.



Specific measures to support mountain people's capacity to adapt to impacts

The participants suggested a number of specific measures to support the adaptive capacity of women and men living in the mountains. These included:

- Building awareness of the impacts of climate change in their daily lives.
- Investing in renewable technologies, like solar energy, and wind energy while discouraging activities that lead to deforestation.
- Implementing drudgery reduction programmes to reduce the workload of women and children by providing subsidies for appropriate technology.
- Empowering women in decision making processes.
- Developing Early Warning systems for disasters.
- Protecting indigenous traditional knowledge that the farmers are applying in the changed climatic condition for food and agriculture.
- Providing access to financial services and income generating activities in the communities in remote mountains.
- Adding value to the mountain niche products, such as NTFP species, if appropriate market accesses is explored.
- Promoting/building the alliances of mountain women and men to have collective strength to better communicate their problems and strengths to the development organizations including government.

The participants also agreed that national climate change policies and strategies in the Himalayan countries should address the different adaptation needs of women and men living in the mountains by recognising the right of each individual to live with dignity and support victims of disaster. They suggested that governments should also realise the farmer's right to equitably participate and share benefits of indigenous traditional agriculture practices.

Actions of governmental institutions to support climate change adaptation efficiently

The e-conference discussion also brought out several general recommendations for actions to make climate change adaptations more efficient and effective. There was a consensus among the participants that gender inequality is a major obstacle to adaptation to change and this issue must be addressed.

- Gender must be mainstreamed in all strategies and programmes aiming to support mountain people's resilience to climate change, especially by promoting the participation of women in decision making at all levels – national to local.
- Government has an important role in coordinating the efforts of other organisations to mainstream gender in all climate change related efforts and development interventions, and making the working environment gender friendly through support from gender experts.
- The role of international institutions is important to enhance the capacity of governments to respond to people's issues.
- Since men and women have different knowledge and concerns about the use and management of mountain natural resources, the policy making process should involve men and women who represent different disciplines, experience, and position.

In conclusion, the participants discussed how the knowledge and skills of women and men must be tapped in order to address their respective needs and to make mechanisms to support adaptation strategies efficient and sustainable.



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