

Policy pointers

Integrating gender analysis in research and policy on environmental change is essential to a definition of 'resilience' that transforms power relations and addresses the root causes of environmental crisis.

Gender equality is not just about women: it is about social justice and wider intra-community inequalities.

Women's inclusion in programmes and initiatives may be detrimental when it does not involve voice, representation and participation in decisions that determine needs and priorities and ways to address them.

Gender-disaggregated data should measure gender gaps rather than counting women; document processes of change and trade-offs within local contexts; and avoid unwarranted assumptions about women.

Building resilience to environmental change by transforming gender relations

How crucial is a gendered perspective on environmental change to sustainable development? A recent workshop brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss why gender relations are still largely absent from debates on climate change and disasters, what misconceptions may exist, and to define the broad lines of a forward-looking action research agenda. Gender equality is not just about women, but about inequalities that cut across social, economic and cultural systems and norms. A gendered perspective helps to identify these inequalities and address the wider issues of voice, representation and participation in decision making. These power inequalities are often a root cause of environmental change, and transforming them is therefore an essential part of a more effective and sustainable approach to building resilience.

Environmental change — including climate change, environmental crisis and 'disasters' — are increasingly central to development policy and practice and also increasingly recognised as gendered experiences. However, gender is a latecomer to the policy debates on environmental change and while there is growing and substantial evidence of the differentiated impacts of environmental change on women and men, gender considerations are still largely equated to women's issues. As a result, striking gaps remain in understanding how these impacts relate to gender and the implications for policymaking.

The lack of attention to gender relations (as opposed to the growing attention to women) in current policy and practice is due largely to a set of interconnected problems:

- Creation of knowledge on environmental change remains essentially 'scientific' and

gender-neutral, where women's and men's experiences are often conflated.

- Women are treated as a homogeneous group, which is generally seen as especially vulnerable to the impacts of environmental change. At the same time they are regarded as 'virtuous' and having a closer relationship with the environment.
- Most policies and practice attempt to address women's practical needs, and neglect addressing broader gender relations. As a result, women's inclusion often builds on gendered responsibilities and increases their burdens without improving their status.
- Related to this, women are most likely to be targeted by policies and practices associated with households coping with environmental and climate change impacts, while gender relations are peculiarly absent from debates on the

Resilience can place power relations centre stage and call for inclusive forms of governance

'green economy' and its implications for greater equality (or inequality)

Integrating gender analysis in research and policy on environmental change is essential to a

definition of 'resilience' that is also transformative of gender relations. This requires urgent attention, as several processes are currently determining the shape of the post-2015 development agenda, including the successor of

the Hyogo Framework for Action on Disasters Risk Reduction, the 2015 Global Climate Change Agreement and the successors to the Millennium Development Goals.

This briefing reports on an international workshop held in London in mid-March 2014. The meeting brought together interested researchers and practitioners to critically review current thinking and practice around gender relations and environmental change, identify gaps and challenges, and pull together the key elements of a future-oriented action research agenda.

Can resilience be achieved without transforming gender relations?

Climate change and disasters literature increasingly uses the term 'resilience', which in its broadest sense refers to 'the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a potentially hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvement of its essential basic structures and functions'.¹ However, environmental change and especially climate change and disasters are indicators of how unsustainable the dominant models of development are. Central to these models are skewed power relations and social inequalities that shape how environmental change is created, its impacts and how it is prevented and remedied.

Resilience can thus take different forms: it can strengthen stability in the status quo and avoid substantive transformations in development models and social and political inequalities, effectively providing only short-term solutions and possibly in the longer term leading to catastrophic systems collapse. Alternatively, resilience can place power relations centre stage, and call for open dialogues and wider, inclusive forms of governance promoting alternative values and discourses, thus addressing the root causes of environmental crisis.²

Transforming gender relations is an essential element of this second definition of resilience, as it is rooted in social justice and addresses wider intra-community inequalities, rather than only those concerning women. These inequalities are intersectional, building on multiple systems of discrimination, including sex, age, class, caste, disability and so on.

Gender in environmental change: unpacking assumptions

Reviewing the literature on both climate change and disasters reveals a clear commonality in the issue of knowledge and how knowledge is constructed and by whom. The climate change discourse is presented as gender neutral: a discussion of scientific 'fact' about a macro level global process. The disasters literature also presents itself as gender neutral, in that data disaggregated by sex do not exist on loss of life and limb or material loss. Implicit in both discourses is an assumed vulnerability of women, who are constructed as victims of climatic events and needing protection. While recognising women are 'at risk', their understanding of risk is not yet taken into account by the experts who set acceptable levels of risk and means of mitigation.

In recent years, events such as Rio+20 have emphasised the global dimension of environmental crisis and introduced new concepts such as planetary boundaries, so promoting a broader view of collective (and differentiated) responsibility in addressing environmental change. However, it has also resulted in an essentialist view of women as victims, by redirecting attention away from the local context where gender relations are embedded, and where their complexity, diversity, and interrelation with environmental change can be more adequately understood and addressed. (See Box 1)

The instrumentalist approach

Since Rio+20, global debates on climate change have focused on women's leadership and on harnessing women's 'potential' as having a special relationship with nature and being a crucial resource for sustainable development. Promoting women's increased leadership, as well as their participation and representation in decision-making spheres at all levels, does contribute to advancing gender equality. However, without taking into account underlying issues of inequality or the fact that women are not a homogeneous group, this approach risks regarding women in the global South as mere resources.

Women have an important role in coping strategies, but these strategies may benefit the household, rather than benefiting them. Women face the risk of a 'double disaster' when post-disaster coping leads to longer working days, deteriorating health and increased risk of violence. These additional demands easily result in the 'feminisation of responsibility and response to disasters',^{4,5} whereby the burden of unpaid care work, typically the responsibility of women, is exacerbated by environmental change, while they are also expected to take on additional responsibilities at the community and household level — often by virtue of their caring capacities. While crisis may bring new gender roles, these may be seen as 'women's' roles, or definitions of women's roles may simply expand to include them. Evidence of changing gender relations over the longer term is less clear.

Does ownership of assets empower women?

Another mainstream view is that rights, especially formal tenure of land, forests and recently the regulating services (eg carbon or watershed services), are essential to women's empowerment. In rural areas, environmental change exacerbates existing trends towards farmland commodification, with droughts and the related (adaptive) irrigation schemes reducing marginal groups' access to productive lands.

Land 'grabs' are not only initiated by international private companies or powerful national elites, but also take place at the intra-household level, and women stand to lose. In both rural areas, where land is an important productive asset, and urban areas, where land is also an economic asset but more closely linked to housing, access to land and housing is shaped by social norms and expectations as well as legal frameworks.

Contradictions between statutory, customary and religious laws create ambiguities or uncertainties, for example, state law usually promotes women's equal rights to inherit land but local practice can be different. Furthermore, there is little evidence that formal ownership of assets on its own empowers women. Security is not necessarily the same thing as formal tenure, and land rights to women do not mean gender equality. Representation and control over decision making remain critical factors of equality.

Questioning dominant development paradigms

Part and parcel of addressing these deeply ingrained and systemic inequalities is questioning dominant development paradigms and how they increase polarisation and marginalisation of some

Box 1. Gender relations, social norms and differentiated responses to environmental change

In many cases, women are not passive victims but their strategies are shaped by gender as well as social relations. In the Lake Faguibine area in Northern Mali, migration has become a key response to the drastic changes in environmental, social and political context in the last three decades. As men migrate, remittances are invested in new crops and activities that exclude women's participation because they do not relate to their traditional rights on land and crops. At the same time, women who belong to the lower (former slaves) group can engage in new income-generating activities outside the house (and the family fields) that are forbidden by social norms to higher status women.³

groups. In the post-Rio and post-2015 discussions, there seems to be a withdrawal of the state and an emergence of the role of the private sector — this might go hand-in-hand with a conversation on gender equality being more instrumentalist rather than rights-based.

It is perhaps unsurprising that gender relations are barely mentioned in the context of the green economy, where issues of equity are only emerging in the wider debate. Informal waste pickers perform essential waste management and recycling in most cities in the Global South and increasingly in cities such as New York and Paris, and the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers is able to influence global debates.⁶

The informal economy as a whole and waste picking in particular are heavily feminised: in Indian cities, up to 80 per cent of waste pickers are women, reflecting their subordinate position in labour markets. While these women are not victims, asymmetrical power relations within the home affect their public engagement. This 'invisibility' means that while their work in the informal sector effectively subsidises the formal economy, green economy debates largely ignore them. As a result, modern (often privatised) waste collection systems promoted by city officials as 'green' are also highly exclusionary and anti-poor — and anti-women, as they form the bulk of informal sector workers.

Gender considerations are also ignored in the energy sector debates, as it is seen as a purely technical issue, yet access to energy (and technology) has a great influence on women's lives. However, this is seen as relating mainly to supporting unpaid care work, for example, providing washing machines may allow women to engage in more paid work — but while washing remains their responsibility there is little positive impact on gender relations or reducing women's time poverty.

In certain circumstances therefore, women's inclusion in programmes and initiatives may be

detrimental, especially where inclusion does not involve voice, representation and participation in decision making. To transform gender and power relations the evidence shows that collective struggles for representation, redistribution and recognition are more effective in challenging structural inequalities.

The role of UNFCCC and REDD+

There are actors who play a part in driving the rapid changes and hence form part of the solution in addressing climate change at national and global level. Parties to the UNFCCC have recently added the issue of gender and climate change as a standing item of their conference sessions' agenda and have been increasingly integrating gender considerations into their decisions.

Global policies and guidance are important, but addressing gender has to be coupled with stronger commitment to resources to address the skewed gender relations, rights, power and equity. In the context of REDD+, advances have been made at the global level and national institutions are also developing frameworks for gender integration. However, using value chain analysis to understand the links between drivers, commodities and net benefits for actors is considered essential for identifying gender empowering mitigation strategies. As REDD+ is a performance-based mechanism, it requires understanding of men's and women's preferences on the different compensation mechanisms.

An agenda for action-research

The overlaps and multiple interactions between gendered divisions of labour and responsibilities and environmental change must be explored. As discussed at the workshop, environmental change can be seen as both challenging and creating opportunities for structural change. And

while there is clearly a need for more information on gender relations and environmental change, it is also necessary to ensure that the ultimate aim of action research is not to replace one paradigm with another, but to give people a voice to effectively develop transformative pathways.

The topics to be explored are numerous, complex and across all traditional research themes. What is perhaps more important is a common approach that can be summarised as follows:

- A focus on process, changing power relations and structural inequalities in wider society, with an emphasis on local context. A gender perspective serves as an entry point to elucidate wider changes/tensions between dominant narratives and the need for deeper transformations in development paradigms
- Supporting voice and representation as essential to increasing choice and substantive participation in decision making
- Ways of working through partnerships and engagement with local organisations to refine agendas based on existing strategies and capacities and to explore transformations. This will include seeking to influence adaptation and green economy policies and ensure that they are inclusive.

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Knowledge Products

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Notes

¹ Lavell, A *et al.* (2012) Climate change: new dimensions in disaster risk, exposure, vulnerability, and resilience. In: Field, CB *et al.* (eds). *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation. A Special Report of Working Groups I and II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, and New York, NY, USA, 25-64. / ² Pelling, M and Manuel-Navarrete, D (2011) From resilience to transformation: exploring the adaptive cycle in two Mexican urban centres. *Ecology and Society* 16(2) 11. / ³ Djoudi, H and Brockhaus, M (2011) Is adaptation to climate change gender neutral? Lessons from communities dependent on livestock and forests in northern Mali. *International Forestry Review* 13(2) / ⁴ Arora-Jonsson, S (2011) Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change* 21 744–751 / ⁵ Bradshaw, S (2013) *Gender, Development and Disasters*. Edward Elgar / ⁶ <http://wiego.org>