



### Journal article details:

Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change: Insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia

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## KEY POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Gender is not just about women, but the arrangement of roles, responsibilities and relations between men and women of different social groups, ages, educational and marital statuses. Both perceptions of risks and actual vulnerabilities are shaped by these roles, responsibilities and relations, and hence may vary across place, time and social position/location.
- ❖ Policies still largely fail to acknowledge the intersection of social relations and identities, which could provide a more exact understanding of adaptive behaviour in semi-arid contexts. To facilitate the inclusion of gender in policies, practices and extension services, gender should form an early focus in dialogue spaces, decision making processes and policy discussions.
- ❖ Adaptive strategies need to pay attention to the divisions of work between men and women to ensure that women's everyday lives are not overburdened, and that suitable technologies are put in place to support their performance of everyday tasks (e.g., ensuring water for domestic use in the context of scarcity).
- ❖ Adaptive strategies also need to work with social norms (that shape what kind of activities are appropriate for men and women to engage in) which might be restrictive but are not inflexible. Such social norms must be taken into consideration, and sometimes challenged, to promote gender equality and improve or increase women's rights.
- ❖ Attention needs to be paid to the growing resource conflicts around the use and management of water and land, and the underlying causes – particularly with the monetisation and commoditisation of these resources posing a threat to the already-precarious survival of some semi-arid communities.
- ❖ New forms of diversification and collective action are emerging, especially by women, and trade-offs between short-term coping strategies and longer-term adaptation are becoming more apparent. All of these changes need to be better understood in terms of how gender works, is arranged and rearranged over time and place. At the same time, by building the capacity of local community – especially women – to access resources and ensure their voices are heard, their adaptive capacity can be increased and their dependency on state welfare can be reduced.
- ❖ Studies on climate change vulnerability and impacts and identification of adaptation strategies should be done from a gender-sensitive perspective. Further research is needed to understand the potential impacts of the reorganisation of domestic groups and the rise in numbers of female-headed households on their adaptive and coping strategies, particularly in the semi-arid regions in Africa.

# INTRODUCTION

Vulnerabilities to impacts of climate change are gendered. Still, policy approaches aimed at strengthening local communities' adaptive capacity largely fail to recognise the gendered nature of everyday realities and experiences. For example, gender is not addressed consistently within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): SDG 5 on gender equality mentions equal access to productive resources including land, while SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns does not recognise the relevance of gender at all, and SDG 13 on climate action identifies 'women' as a single group who need to be enabled to engage with climate-related planning and management.

Despite considerable lobbying and preparation by women's rights activists and many State parties, the final Paris Agreement (COP 21) disappointingly fails to demonstrate gender-sensitivity across all its dimensions. Of the 8+ references to the integration of gender considerations in the operative parts of the earlier versions of the draft agreement (including in finance, technology and mitigation approaches), only 2 explicit

references to "gender-responsive" approaches were included in the final agreement - in the sections on adaptation and capacity-building. While critically important, these reinforce the notion of women as victims of climate change in need of support to strengthen their resilience. They do not acknowledge women's capabilities as local leaders – given appropriate financial and technological support – to address climate change and provide community-driven solutions.

To bring greater visibility to the importance of gender we need to better understand how different groups of women and men can adapt to change in terms of their rights, access to resources, divisions of work, and social norms and expectations. We need to recognise that, across places and groups, different strategies and a diversity of adaptation practices exist. In this brief, drawing on examples from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia, we detail how gender is or isn't an integral element of adaptation practices and policies, and offer recommendations for how greater inclusion can be achieved.

## GENDER AND ADAPTATION PRACTICES: Key lessons from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia

**LESSON 1: Within the policy domain, gender is hardly addressed, and if it is, there is typically reference only to women and as a homogenous category, with no reflection on possible differences based on social location of class and ethnicity, or geographical and agro-ecological contexts. However, such differences can be stark.**

*Key example:* In the context of changing seasonal patterns of temperature and rainfall in Ahmednagar in Maharashtra State, western India, a striking difference can be seen in both the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of households with seasonally irrigated land, those dependent entirely on rain fed farming, and landless labourers<sup>1</sup>. Workloads increased most for women in rain fed farming households due to fluctuating crop yields, longer distances to travel for fuel, fodder and water for their livestock, with adverse health consequences. The landless moved to non-farm labouring work outside the village, as in brick kilns, and in households with irrigation there were some shifts in work patterns due to the adoption of short-duration crops. However, both these groups were able to cope better than those dependent on rain fed farming.



**LESSON 2:** While development organisations are increasingly paying attention to social differentiation amongst women, policies intended to address gender within adaptation responses to climate change do not explicitly discuss male activities and contributions, or indeed their absence. Yet, for targeted and equitable policy making, it is important to identify those most vulnerable based on a range of socio-demographic variables including gender, class, education, access to assets and social networks.

*Key example:* At the local level, it is not only women who are disconnected from the policy making discourse. While some men may be present in decision-making roles, men are generally portrayed as lazy, or choosing to leave agricultural and rural areas, with no apparent responsibility towards their family and community. This unhelpful generalisation fails to convey reality as, in addition to not addressing potential male vulnerabilities, it also diminishes the responsibility men have towards their household's survival and livelihood security. Indeed, men migrating for survival due to climate and livelihood shocks in India often end up in urban slums, working hard in poor living and working conditions, developing a range of health problems that may in fact enhance male morbidity and mortality in the medium term<sup>2</sup>. Policy making, therefore, needs to connect much better with local realities.



**LESSON 3:** In the context of climate change, as well as changes in economic policies towards neoliberalism and growing political uncertainties, it is important to consider adaptation in a more holistic way, to include changes at multiple levels, and across different domains (climate, political, ecological, economic, and social). Non-climatic development drivers, including structural inequalities, heavily influence the severity with which extreme climate events impact particular groups and individuals<sup>3</sup>, and it is critical to identify and articulate these larger drivers to adequately assess current and future vulnerability to climate.

*Key example:* The semi-arid region of Ghana has the highest incidence of extreme poverty in the country, driven by the interaction of colonial and postcolonial neglect of these regions, and high levels of climate variability and severe droughts<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the current emphasis on agricultural intensification and liberalisation of the sector has favoured large-scale developments (including the proliferation of foreign direct investment in biofuels), reinforcing radical land fragmentation, land grabbing and marginalisation of smallholder farmers<sup>5</sup>. Smallholders' strategies to cope with these changes are diverse, ranging from migration and remittances, dry season farming, use of improved crop varieties, livestock maintenance, to social networking and even skipping meals<sup>4;5;6</sup>. If adaptation responses recognise the effects that non-climatic elements have on vulnerability, then they can more holistically and effectively reduce negative impacts.



**LESSON 4: In a context of cutbacks in state welfare measures, people are increasingly dependent on household incomes and kin-groups for survival. Strategies that enhance cooperation and provide opportunities to both women and men and, crucially, renegotiate gender roles and responsibilities in more equal ways, are therefore important.**

*Key example:* In Bobirwa, Botswana, subsistence farmers (mainly women) with limited options for alternative livelihoods, are placed in vulnerable positions as drought and water scarcity – closely linked to crop failure, infertile soils and poor animal health – make them dependant on welfare programs. When managing household food and nutrition security becomes a challenge, they can become dependent on handouts and food baskets. Supplementary feeding provided in public health facilities creates an additional demand on their time, as women are expected to take children for welfare days and feeding at the clinics. Modern farming methods based on drought-resistant crop varieties and groundwater irrigation have been proposed as a solution to crop failures. However, such farming is expensive and usually done for commercial purposes by men who have the means to own large commercial farms. As a result, traditional labour and livestock-sharing practices have also declined, with such commercial farmers using government subsidies and packages rather than reciprocal arrangements with women.

**LESSON 5: Critical information on different types of adaptation strategies – that are both productive and replicable – needs to be accessible to both men and women.**

*Key example:* In East Africa, several examples reveal how collective action and decision making can contribute to ensuring sustainable livelihoods. In Kenya, through their collectives, widows and divorced women affected by HIV and AIDS – some of the most marginalised groups in the locality – are able to invest in sustainable innovations like rainwater harvesting and agroforestry to address growing livelihood and water stresses<sup>7</sup>.



- <sup>1</sup> Mhaskar, B (2010). Community responses to seasonal variation – Learnings from a watershed village. In: *What are we in for? – Rural dynamics in a context of climate change*. Watershed Organisation Trust. Pune.
- <sup>2</sup> Mitra, A., S. Wajih and B.K. Singh. (2015). *Wheezing Ecosystem, Depleting Livelihood Services and Climate Change Resilience: The Saga of Gorakhpur City, Uttar Pradesh, India*. Gorakhpur: Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group and London: *International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)*.
- <sup>3</sup> Tschakert, P., van Oort, B., Lera St. Clair, A. and LaMadrid, A. (2013). Inequality and transformation analyses: A complementary lens for addressing vulnerability to climate change. *Climate and Development*, 5(4): 340-350.
- <sup>4</sup> Rademacher-Schulz, C. and Mahama, E. S. (2012). “Where the rain falls”, Project case study: Ghana. Results from Nadowli District, Upper West region, Ghana. (Report No. 3). Bonn: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).
- <sup>5</sup> Nyantakyi-Frimpong, H. and Bezner-Kerr, R. (2015). The relative importance of climate change in the context of multiple stressors in semi-arid Ghana. *Global Environmental Change* 32, 40–56.
- <sup>6</sup> Wossen, T. and Berger, T. (2015). Climate variability, food security and poverty: Agent-based assessment of policy options for farm households in Northern Ghana. *Environmental Science and Policy* 47: 95-107.
- <sup>7</sup> Gabriellson, S. and V. Ramasar (2013). Widows: agents of change in a climate of water uncertainty. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 60(0): 34-42.

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For more information visit [www.assaradapt.org](http://www.assaradapt.org) or [n.rao@cariaa.net](mailto:n.rao@cariaa.net)

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