

The background is a grayscale photograph of a group of people, likely in a meeting or community gathering. Overlaid on this are several large, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, orange, and teal. These shapes are arranged in a way that they partially obscure the people in the background. The shapes include diamonds, circles, and irregular polygons, creating a layered, abstract effect.

ASSAR

ADAPTATION AT SCALE
IN SEMI-ARID REGIONS
2014–2018

GENDER IS ONE OF
MANY SOCIAL FACTORS
INFLUENCING RESPONSES
TO CLIMATE CHANGE

AN ASSAR CROSS-REGIONAL INSIGHT



People's vulnerabilities and responses to climatic and non-climatic risks, vary according to the way that social norms, market signals, laws and policies intersect with different dimensions of their identity. To avoid further marginalising the already vulnerable, we need to steer away from conventional approaches that focus on binaries of men and women, and move towards considering intersectional variables, that is, how aspects of age, ethnicity, class and marital status, amongst others, interact with gender to shape vulnerability and response strategies.

ASSAR's focus on social differentiation and gender

One of ASSAR's central questions was to understand how and why vulnerability is differentiated between communities and households (as well as within households), and to explore what this differentiation meant for coping and adaptation responses. We used mixed-methods research in rural, urban and peri-urban drylands to examine the socially-differentiated and gendered nature of vulnerability and adaptation. While focussing on household and intra-household vulnerability and adaptation, [our research](#) also made connections with broader environmental and socio-institutional dynamics to develop an understanding of vulnerability that is relational, dynamic, and embedded in wider political economy factors. Changes in rules, norms and practices in one institutional site could influence changes in other sites; however, the direction of change is unpredictable, and depends on power relations between individuals and groups. [Our research highlights](#) the structural constraints that depress women's agency in semi-arid regions, be they unequal education and labour market opportunities, or the lack of child-care, health, drinking water, and sanitation services.

At the community level, our research approach included surveys and qualitative methods such as focus group discussions and [life history interviews](#). We also brought different people together through [participatory scenario analysis](#) and vulnerability risk assessment processes (in [southern Africa](#) and [India](#)) in order to draw out which households were more vulnerable and why. Within households, we assessed the role of household structure and relationships between members in shaping power relations, agency, voice and aspirations, all of which determine whether people can or cannot respond to pressures. At an individual level, we demonstrated how [women and men are not homogenous categories](#) – their levels of vulnerability and abilities to respond to climate change impacts are differentiated by a combination of cultural, institutional, and demographic characteristics. Ultimately, the focus on intersecting identities allowed us to identify ways to support vulnerable women and men in local communities in addressing climate change impacts and the range of risks they are exposed to without compromising their wellbeing or exacerbating inequities.

KEY INSIGHTS

MEN AND WOMEN ARE NOT HOMOGENOUS CATEGORIES

Factors such as gender, age, marital status, and ethnicity or caste interact to shape how households manage risks. We see these multiple identities playing out differently in each context, affecting adaptive capacity to respond to climate-related risks.

How people experience and respond to risks varies, depending on factors like age, ethnicity, gender and class. Gender interacts with multiple identities as well as other factors such as education, income, and access to information to shape access to material, financial and social resources. This ‘bundle of resources’ affects a person’s agency, and influences how they are impacted by, and can respond to, climate change. For example, young men in South India with marginal to no landholding, often migrate to cities where they enter insecure livelihoods with poor living conditions. Their lack of resources and contingent livelihood choices exacerbate their vulnerability. On the other hand, women seldom migrate alone, in keeping with local socio-cultural norms, and thus avoid these precarious spaces. Yet with sole responsibility for maintaining their rural household, women face other vulnerabilities in terms of over-work and indebtedness.

Marital status and dynamics appear to play a key role in risk management, sometimes more so than assets and education levels. For example, in Namibia, we found instances where educated women who participate in village decisions are unable to invest in new farm technologies because they have little decision-making power within their own homes. At other times, with growing male unemployment, men may be unable to provide their wives capital to set up small enterprises, a conjugal expectation in East and West Africa, constraining women from meeting their obligations. Women then are increasingly resentful of their dependence on such men, often initiating separation. Therefore, we cannot assume to know who is most vulnerable: it may be young women struggling to establish their small enterprises, young men in search of employment, or wives in polygamous households, with little say in household decision making.



Recommendations

- Sex-disaggregated data in analyses, policies and plans is not enough. To identify the most vulnerable, and promote more effective adaptation, we need to consider the interaction of factors, such as ethnicity/ caste, age and class; the social norms to which they are subject; and the experiences they entail.
- Vulnerable women and men need context-specific support, in the form of both resources and services, to deal with the multiple challenges they face. These could vary from capital and credit for some, to child-care and health support for others.
- In order to set up effective mechanisms for more equitable access to and distribution of resources, it is important to create platforms and spaces where the needs and priorities of different groups of women and men can be discussed, and strategies to address these developed.

UNDERSTANDING INTRA-HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS IS CRITICAL TO ADAPTATION

In semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia, severe pressure from climate change and other non-climatic stressors affects households – and the members within them – differently. Agricultural-based livelihoods and forms of diversification are associated with particular gender roles. Climate change in drylands is shifting the nature of responsibility sharing and cooperation in the household across gender and generations.

Household dynamics are changing in response to both climatic (e.g., experiencing drought or good rains) and non-climatic factors (e.g., migration and other socio-economic changes). Age and gender, and the social expectations and norms they are embedded in, influence, for instance, who migrates and who stays behind. In Ethiopia and Namibia young men and women migrate to urban areas, diversifying their livelihoods into off-farming activities, for improved incomes. Their remittances serve as useful buffers to risks. In some cases, women who lack appropriate skills remain in farming, looking after household members and resources while men migrate, and are therefore unable to explore strategies to strengthen their adaptive capacities.

Driven by shifts in roles, responsibilities, and indeed aspirations often not aligned with farming, local gender contracts are being renegotiated, and new forms of cooperation and conflict emerging. With women taking on provisioning roles traditionally held by men, they also seek a greater share in household resources and decision making. If this is not forthcoming, tensions and violence may increase.



Recommendations

- In contexts of persistent drought and scarcity, livelihoods are diversifying, and new household forms, often multi-local and multi-generational, are emerging as a response. Adaptation planning needs to recognise the changes in gendered roles and contributions, in order to respond to changing needs and aspirations.
- Complementarity and sharing of resources and responsibilities within households is key to improving adaptive capacity. For this, targeting women alone is not enough; rather it is important to engage both men and women to challenge unequal social norms and patriarchal traditions, and contribute to forming more equitable conjugal and gender partnerships. Efforts are also needed to strengthen intergenerational cooperation between household members.

WOMEN ARE NOT NECESSARILY VICTIMS OR POWERLESS

Women in semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia are not lacking in their sense of agency, but in the context of stress and few livelihood options, their agency is directed towards short-term survival and coping. Supporting safe and remunerative livelihood diversification, and a renegotiation of power relationships to minimise unintended risks, are essential for making women critical agents of longer-term adaptation in a more equitable and inclusive manner.

Our research challenges the assumption that women are victims of climate change and powerless in its wake. They often have no option but to diversify their livelihoods and exercise agency to negotiate social norms and laws that may inhibit this process. Women in Ghana and Maharashtra (India), while working on family farms, have little decision-making control over the income earned from their farms, from cash crops, or from informal businesses. They seek however to expand the spaces for negotiation and welfare available to them. On the other hand, in Namibia and Kenya, widows and female heads of households are exercising their new-found agency to control the income earned from diversifying their livelihoods. Yet in both cases, women felt that their workload had increased, as despite taking on new tasks in the sphere of production, household chores and responsibilities remain unchanged.

Further concerns related to the often-risky livelihoods that women, but also young men, engage in out of desperation – which impact negatively on their long-term health and safety. In the case of women, while this could involve repeated pregnancies and exposure to infection, for men, apart from issues of mental health, it could, in the extreme, lead to involvement in violent conflict and to a threat to life itself.

Recommendations

- Adaptation efforts need to recognise that individuals are embedded in relations of power and hierarchies of authority, and without explicitly acknowledging these, it may be hard to progress towards equitable and sustainable outcomes. For this, apart from working with women, it is also important to challenge social norms by working with men, and across institutional levels, from community bodies to the government.
- To strengthen women's agency and adaptive capacity, barriers across institutions need to be addressed. So while improving access to jobs, productive assets, and information on livelihood options, one needs to concurrently address domestic and reproductive constraints, through provisioning of appropriate infrastructure (drinking water, sanitation) and services (child care, health care).
- In order to counter risky or illegal livelihoods, vulnerable men and women need to be provided with better access to social support, education and technical skills, along with alternative sustainable livelihood opportunities.

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