

CLIMATE CHANGE IS A FEMINIST ISSUE

Contributed by Erika Yarrow
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Yifat Susskind* describes the work that MADRE undertakes to empower women in communities most exposed to environmental disaster.

For nearly 25 years MADRE has worked directly with women in communities devastated by disasters, such as tropical storms and droughts, which are becoming more prevalent as climate change intensifies. Based on this experience, MADRE recognises the disproportionate threat that climate change poses to women, as well as women's unique capacities to build their communities' resilience to the dangers of climate change.

What has gender got to do with it?

Gender, or the distinct social roles assigned to men and women, is a critical part of all development initiatives, because relations between men and women are a core organising principle of every human society. A gender analysis is not a special focus on women, but rather an understanding of how discrimination against women and gender roles interact to shape men and women's enjoyment of human rights. In the context of climate change, a gender analysis promotes an understanding of the ways that men and women are impacted differently by climate disasters and by adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Most approaches to tackling the threats of climate change focus on scientific and technological aspects of the problem, ignoring its social impact. Both the Kyoto Protocol and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change neglect to even mention gender. Yet, developing a gender analysis—an understanding of the ways that men and women are affected differently by climate change and respond differently to its threats—is crucial to saving lives and developing policies that can avert the worst consequences.

What has poverty got to do with it?

Climate change threatens everyone, but it does not threaten all people equally. Poor people, whose governments are unable or unwilling to respond to their needs, are most at risk. Since 1990, more than 90 percent of natural disasters have occurred in poor countries. Worldwide, over 70 percent of poor people are women and this leaves them vulnerable to climate change for the following reasons:

- People who have been displaced from their lands and forced to live in lowlands are at risk of flooding and mudslides
- People already denied healthcare, adequate food and clean water have the least resistance to food shortages and increased incidence of disease
- People living in rural areas and regions neglected by government are often denied adequate warning of disasters and resources for rescue and relief efforts
- People who are denied information, education, technology, skills and infrastructure have the least capacity to adapt to the effects of climate change

Disasters

A hurricane is a natural disaster until it hits the shore. Then it becomes a social issue that affects women and men differently because of the distinct social roles and expectations that they fulfill. During cyclones in south-east Asia, many more women than men have been killed, in part because:

- Early warnings are posted in public places, where women rarely go
- Instead of running to safety, women stay behind to rescue children and the elderly
- Girls and women are rarely taught to swim
- Women stay indoors because of social prohibitions against leaving home unaccompanied

Gender roles not only shape a person's vulnerability to disaster, but also their behaviour in relief and recovery periods. In the aftermath of disasters, women extend their social networks and intensify their roles of caring for families and communities to meet the extraordinary needs of survivors. The most effective relief and recovery operations rely on and support local women, recognising the tremendous burden women carry, the specific threats women face, and the skills that women possess.

In September 2007, MADRE responded to the devastation caused to communities in Nicaragua by Hurricane Felix. Our relief effort was undertaken in partnership with Wangki Tangni, a local indigenous women's and community development organisation. This partnership ensured that aid reached those most in need and that a progressive

women's organisation was strengthened in the process. As an organisation with deep roots in affected communities, Wangki Tangni has access to local social networks which were able to distribute aid in remote communities, areas that government and large relief organisations often fail to reach. The organisation also has an awareness of the specific challenges facing women in crisis situations, including increased violence and rape, disproportionate responsibility for injured family members and the special needs of pregnant and nursing women.

Around the world, women's traditional knowledge about building wind-resistant housing, planting trees to mitigate erosion, preserving seeds, composting to improve soil quality and conserving safe drinking water have protected generations of communities from the worst effects of flooding. As the threat of flooding increases due to rising sea levels and worsening tropical storms, women's traditional knowledge needs to be protected and adapted to meet new challenges associated with climate change.

Food security

Because of gender discrimination, women and girls eat last and least when food is made scarce (including pregnant and nursing women, who have the greatest need for nutritious food). Yet women plant, produce, procure and prepare most of the world's food. Women are responsible for approximately 75 percent of household food production in sub-Saharan Africa, 65 percent in Asia, and 45 percent in Latin America. In most communities, women hold the most reliable knowledge about promoting food security, preserving threatened food supplies and ensuring their families' survival in the face of shortages.

In Nicaragua, flooding caused by Hurricane Felix struck just before the bean harvest, destroying the staple food supply of dozens of small indigenous communities. In response, MADRE enhanced its Harvesting Hope programme, through which local women learn techniques for sustainable agriculture and cultivate small organic farms. Conducted in partnership with Wangki Tangni, Harvesting Hope works to promote food security, combat hunger and equip women to adapt their agricultural know-how to changing climate conditions.

Water scarcity

The time-consuming task of gathering and transporting water generally falls to women. As water becomes scarce, women's workload increases dramatically. Girls' school enrollment drops as they trek longer distances to find water. During water shortages, women's knowledge of managing and maintaining water sources becomes critical to the survival of communities.

In Kenya, the women of MADRE's sister organisations are enduring prolonged periods of drought. In many places, the livestock on which such pastoralist peoples depend are no longer viable. Across cultures, sudden economic crisis correlates with rising rates of gender-based violence within families. In Kenya, worsening poverty for pastoralist communities has also led to a sharp rise in forced child marriages. As men struggle to replace income from lost livestock, increasing numbers of fathers resort to trading their daughters—some as young as eight or nine—for bridal dowries. The problem illustrates that a seemingly technical or scientific problem—climate change—has far-reaching implications for women's human rights and must be addressed within a human rights framework.

MADRE's work to mitigate threats associated with climate change in north-west Kenya include human rights training, through which local, indigenous women develop anti-violence strategies and create economic alternatives to livelihoods that are threatened by drought. MADRE works in the women-led village of Umoja, Kenya, supporting the Umoja Uaso Women's Group to move from herding cattle to raising camels, which require less water. A women's micro-enterprise project in Umoja empowers members with a degree of economic autonomy that in turn enables them to insist on basic rights for themselves and their daughters. Income generated through the project allows the women to keep their girls in school, rather than consign them to forced early marriages. MADRE's support for the Umoja primary school, through building construction, teacher training and the provision of books, school supplies and didactic materials, is part of our broad-based efforts to enhance community resilience to climate change by promoting human rights.

Health

Worldwide, the compound effect of poverty and gender discrimination is the single gravest threat to women's health. Women have the least access to health services, nutritious food, clean water and opportunities for rest. As human health declines overall, women face the greatest risk of illness, as well as unsustainable work burdens of caring for the sick. Although they are the most threatened, women provide critical resources for maintaining health. Their capacity to activate social networks for care-giving, their stewardship of medicinal plants, their expertise in traditional medicine and, of course, the health of women themselves, must be protected in order to defend women's human rights and enable communities to adapt to increased health threats associated with climate change.

In Sudan, drought has decimated the grazing areas of livestock on which half of all rural nomadic people depend. The dry soil has been depleted further by wind erosion. As larger areas of land become arid, public health is threatened by

the lack of food, water and the loss of biodiversity, including medicinal plants. The single gravest threat to public health is ongoing warfare, itself fueled by competition over water and arable land.

MADRE works in Sudan to address the health needs of women and families threatened by climate change and war. Through our partner organisation, Zenab for Women in Development, teams of volunteer doctors, midwives and nurses provide free health consultations and medical treatment for families which have been displaced from their lands by the conflict in Darfur. MADRE supported week-long health fairs are part of a comprehensive programme to meet a range of urgent physical and mental health needs generated by the crisis in Sudan.

Women living in poverty are the most threatened by the dangers that stem from climate change. They are also key actors in ensuring their communities' ability to cope with these changes. Defending the full range of women's rights within the context of addressing climate change is essential to both protecting women themselves and to cultivating their capacity for leadership—on which so many lives depend.

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