

GENDER & CLIMATE CHANGE

Practical Action’s experiences and examples of gender differentiated impacts of climate change, the roles of women as agents of change and opportunities for women

Mandate: Table 1, A.4, Annex to 3/CP.25

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Introduction

About Practical Action. We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone. We help people find solutions to some of the world’s toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty. Big change starts small.

Practical Action is pleased to respond to UNFCCC’s call for submissions to “*share experiences on dimensions and examples of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change, the role of women as agents of change, and opportunities for women.*” The following is a summary of discussions conducted in 2021 with our gender focal points from across Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is far from an exhaustive account, but highlights some of the key observations of our teams working with communities on the frontlines of the climate emergency.

Gender differentiated impacts of climate change

Practical Action works with communities across ten countries in Africa, South Asia and Latin America. We work with communities on regenerative agriculture, resilience, decentralised renewable energy, sanitation and waste management. Through our work we are seeing climate change exacerbating existing gender inequalities. In the contexts where Practical Action works, women already work longer hours than their male counterparts. Women are widely expected to earn money (‘productive work’), look after the home, children and other dependents (‘reproductive work’ or ‘care work’), and participate in community forums and institutions (‘community work’). In addition, many of the specific activities assigned to women are the most laborious and therefore drudgery is a daily reality. This gendered inequality in workloads can be stark and is attested for

example by the UN department of Economic and Social Affairs which asserts that, *“the latest data collected on 90 countries and territories between 2001 and 2019 indicate that, on an average day, women spend about 2.5 times as many hours as men on unpaid domestic work and care work.”*¹

In the communities where Practical Action works we are seeing the climate emergency exacerbating these inequalities, especially for rural women. As extreme weather events become more prevalent and more pernicious (for example, droughts, heat stress, flooding, landslides), rural livelihoods are becoming more challenged, which is accelerating rural to urban migration. But it is often men who first migrate to cities, leaving women behind to shoulder the additional work burden of maintaining farms and rural businesses alone, whilst also continuing to care for infants, children and elderly dependents. This is leading to longer working hours, and in many communities, high levels of stress and physical exhaustion.

Agricultural activities are becoming particularly challenging with increasingly unpredictable weather patterns leading to reduced productivity. For example, in communities around Viso in Peru we are seeing a 40% reduction in alfalfa yields. In communities where access to food is already highly gendered, such as where we work in Darfur Sudan, reductions in availability of food due to reduced agricultural productivity are compounded by social norms around male preference during mealtimes, leading to increased malnutrition amongst women and girls particularly.

Meanwhile, whilst some men who migrate to urban areas do send back remittances to the families they have left behind in rural areas, many start new lives in the cities. This leaves increasing numbers of women-headed households in rural areas which are even more vulnerable to extreme poverty.

Rural livelihoods are often highly dependent on natural capital, such as water sources and biomass for fuel. In many communities, collecting water and fuel is a responsibility assigned to women and girls. As climate change affects rainfall patterns and population pressures grow, we see women and girls having to travel further and spend longer to collect sufficient water and fuel for household needs. This is reducing time spent on other activities, such as education, earning incomes and caring for children and younger siblings. It is also leaving women and girls at increased risk of harassment and violence as they travel further from homesteads and villages.

In addition, in some contexts where we work, gendered responsibilities around water collection and use are leading to increased exposure of women and girls to vector-borne diseases. As increased global temperatures lead to the spread of mosquitos into new areas, we are seeing that rural women and girls in parts of Bolivia for example are disproportionately and increasingly at risk of malaria, dengue and zika virus, as their responsibilities around water collection lead to increased exposure to new mosquito breeding sites. At the same time, as primary caregivers to both infants and elderly relatives, women are more exposed to infectious diseases when nursing others. This of course has

¹ UN Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. SDG5 Progress and Info. Available here.

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direct impacts on their health, but also their abilities to earn incomes and attend to other priorities – thereby further exacerbating the stress and exhaustion mentioned above.

The increasing frequency and severity of climate related disasters (e.g. floods, landslides, droughts, heat stress) is leading to ever eroding adaptive capacity to cope, as households struggle to regain the economic status they had attained pre-disaster. This is especially true of women-headed households where the multiple domestic and care responsibilities, combined with social norms that restrict mobility, leave women with fewer and lower income-earning opportunities. Women tend to be overrepresented in the informal economy which provides no security or safety net in times of crisis, such as in the aftermath of a climate related disaster. Coping mechanisms that we are seeing in highly climate vulnerable contexts such as coastal and riverine Bangladesh include early marriage of girls and school drop-out. The stress that households are under following such disasters also increases the prevalence of domestic violence, of which women and children are the principal victims, and men the principal perpetrators.

Practical Action has extensive experience of working with government ministries to develop and implement effective early warning systems for communities at risk of flooding and landslides. Our experience has shown that these systems need to be carefully and deliberately designed to ensure their accessibility and responsiveness to women's needs and priorities. This includes consideration of the method of warning dissemination and the importance of multi-channel dissemination, as well as the timing of warnings: longer lead times/advance warnings provide women, who are often responsible for caring duties as well as for some livestock and household assets, with time to react. Gender responsiveness of evacuation information, processes and infrastructure is also critical: for example, considerations around the accessibility and safety of disaster shelters. Our work shows that gender norms intersect with other aspects of social identity to compound and exacerbate vulnerability during and after climate related disasters. Key aspects include age, disability, pregnancy, caring responsibilities and gender diversity.² Key to all our work on early warning systems is ensuring that missing voices, including those of women and gender diverse individuals, are at the heart of designing and reviewing systems.

Roles of women as agents of change

Across all Practical Action's work with communities on the frontline of the climate emergency is the promotion of and support to women as agents of change and as leaders. Fundamental to this is recognition of the adaptive capacity, resilience and climate leadership that women are already demonstrating in communities around the world.

Agriculture is a case in point. Women play a vital role in ensuring food security and nutrition in most communities. Nearly half the world's farmers are women. Currently, women smallholder

² For further information on Practical Action's approach to developing gender transformative early warning systems see the following publications: Experiences from Nepal and Peru; Policy Recommendations and Practical Actions for Baguio City; Disability Inclusive Early Warning Systems.

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farmers are finding ways to adapt their agriculture to the changing climate despite persistent inequalities in access to services, finance, markets, and technology. For example, in Zimbabwe women farmers in drought-prone rural areas are cultivating and propagating small grain landraces that are better suited to the changing climate.³

Whilst social norms in many of the contexts where Practical Action works prevent or limit women's opportunity to adopt formal leadership roles, actually we see that when it comes to adopting new technologies that improve adaptive capacity, oftentimes women are more proactive than their male counterparts. In addition, in some contexts where we work we see that women tend to act more swiftly and more decisively on early warning information than their male counterparts. These insights are critical to our work to develop and support inclusive community institutions that share weather and climate related information, engage with local and national government to improve resource allocation for climate resilience, and provide critical services and coordination during and after climate-related disasters. In many rural communities, as described above, we see that women's responsibilities around natural resource use (water and fuel collection for example) means they have unrivalled contextual knowledge of how natural capital and weather patterns are changing locally. This nuanced detailed understanding is critical for developing appropriate and effective strategies to address climate adaptation, mitigation and Loss and Damage.

In summary, women in frontline communities must not be viewed as passive recipients of climate related policy and programmes. On the contrary, we need women in frontline communities to be genuine partners in developing and implementing solutions to the climate emergency. Practical Action's experience of working in frontline communities on regenerative agriculture, resilience, early warning systems, decentralised renewable energy, and sanitation and waste management solutions has shown that only when we recognise and value the knowledge and expertise of women in frontline communities, can solutions be co-developed that are inclusive, effective and sustainable.

Recommendations

The climate emergency is already undermining development gains achieved so far. As the crisis accelerates, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including the promise to "*leave no one behind*", will become increasingly difficult. Deliberate and urgent attention needs to focus on the gender differentiated impacts of the climate crisis, and include consideration of how these intersect with other key aspects of social identity such as socio-economic status, age, disability, rural/urban location and ethnicity (and in some contexts caste). Strategies and finance need to recognise these and find tangible ways to address them in adaptation, mitigation and Loss and Damage.

Practical Action's experience of working with frontline communities leads us to recommend the following.

³ For further info: Gender and Farmer Managed Seed Systems in Zimbabwe (practicalaction.org)

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- The Climate Emergency requires a whole of society approach and gender is an excellent entry point for the UNFCCC to promote and use as an indicator to hold parties accountable for a whole of society approach, in the planning, negotiation and delivery of climate action.
- Gender should be central to the national review and planning for NDC’s and national communications and not limited to parties alone, gender and inclusion must be advocated for in the Warsaw International mechanism for Loss and damage, in the Technology Mechanism, in the Financial Mechanism and in the specific plans of action including but not limited to the Gender Action Plan, the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture, the Nairobi Work Programme, the Glasgow Dialogue, etc.
- Entrenched socioeconomic inequalities mean that climate change impacts are being experienced most acutely by women, low-income and marginalised groups, youth, people with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples. These voices should be amplified through proactive action. Government and civil society must show solidarity with these people as rights-holders, not as “beneficiaries”. The knowledge and expertise that women in frontline communities’ hold is part of the solution.
- The gender differentiated impacts of climate change should be recognised through effective data collection and reporting processes. These impacts cannot be overlooked by focusing on gender-blind global or national averages only.
- All parties at COP27 and beyond must make substantive steps towards gender balance in their delegations.⁴ And the UNFCCC must lead by example and commit to at least equal representation on panels, in constituted bodies and in consultative processes to develop NDCs, national communications etc.
- All parties should nominate National Gender & Climate Change Focal Points and these must reach out and engage with women’s groups and civil society organisations working with women and other marginalised groups on the frontlines of the climate emergency.⁵
- More broadly, the voices, views and priorities of women from frontline communities, must be sought by parties, including via the constituted bodies under the convention such as Women and Gender Constituency, as well as Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform, Indigenous Peoples Constituency, Youth Constituency, International Disability Caucus.
- Women from frontline communities must play a central part in developing, implementing, and overseeing the strategies, action plans and budgets that emerge from COP27 and beyond, including those regarding mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage.

⁴ The assessment of the gender breakdown of negotiating teams at COP25 indicated that 40% of delegates were women and only 27% of heads and deputy heads of delegations were women (*UNFCCC FCCC/CP/2020/3, Gender Composition, report by the Secretariat*).

⁵ Current list of National Gender & Climate Change Focal Points available [here](#).

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