GENDER, WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE: KEY CHALLENGES

Water scarcity and drought

Water sustains human life, agricultural and livestock production, and industry. Increase in drought, greater evaporation, and changes in rainfall patterns and run-offwill reduce water availability, particularly in already water-scarce areas. These stresses will be superimposed on wider pressures on water systems such as desertification and groundwater extraction. Over 130 million people already are exposed to droughtsii and the repeated shocks of multiple or sequential drought events sink many households deeper into poverty. Declining water availability will strain agricultural and livestock production already hindered by land degradation and price shocks. This will result in food and economic insecurity of women and men especially in areas dominated by rainfed production, with as much as 50% reduction of yield from rainfed agriculture in Subsaharan Africa by 20201. Decline of the agriculture sector will particularly affect women who are responsible for approximately 75% of household food production in SubSaharan Africa, 65% in Asia and 45% in Latin Americavi. Young girls and women risk greater malnourishment in societies and families that may privilege limited food resources to male members of households.

Responsible for providing water for their families, increasing water scarcity will also increase the burden on women and girls who will have to spend more time and effort to carry, store and purify water. It may also lead to more economic hardship as families, particularly in urban areas, increasingly rely on private water sources.

Flooding

Changes in rainfall patterns and increases in extreme weather events such as cyclones and storms lead to flooding and landslides causing death, injury, and significant losses of property. Already, over 521 million people are exposed to floods and 344 million to tropical cyclonesii. While flooding in some areas like the Ganga Basin, are regular events providing vital water for irrigation and replenishing soil fertility, the frequency, timing, intensity and duration of flood hazards is changing. Often the extent of flooding is intensified due to poorly maintained embankments and structural measures, and in urban areas poor land use planning and inadequate drainage.

In addition to destruction of homes and infrastructure, and loss of crops, livestock and seed, flooding will also inundate land, decrease soil fertility and destroy fodder resources, limiting agricultural production. Transport and communication linkages may also be compromised. Women face additional challenges collecting water and cleaning and maintaining houses after flooding.

Women and men face differential risk to extreme climate events and flooding. In the devastating cyclone and flood of 1991 in Bangladesh, the death rate was reportedly five times higher among womenii. This was due to cultural norms inhibiting women's movement without a man present, women not having learned how to swim, and women's lack of access to early warning information. Men and boys may place themselves at higher risk trying to conduct "heroic acts", as it was reported in the case of Hurricane Mitch that hit Honduras in 1998iii. Women and girls are more likely to become victims of domestic and sexual violence after a disaster or in areas of conflict-induced migration, particularly when families have been displaced and are living in overcrowded emergency or transitional housing where they lack privacy.

Health and disease

Climate change-induced droughts, flooding and extreme weather events degrade and reduce potable water supplies and increase water-associated disease such as cholera and diarrhoea, particularly in areas with inadequate sanitation. Flooding and waterlogging may also serve as breeding grounds for vectors for diseases such as malaria and dengue. At present, diseases caused by inadequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation already kill an estimated 2.213 million people per year in developing countries, of which 90% are children under the age of five. Women and girls are particularly exposed to water-associated diseases through responsibilities of washing and water collection. Gender discrimination in allocation of medicines and access to health services may place women and girls further at risk. Furthermore, women often are the main caregivers for family members suffering from disease and illness.

Access to resources

Access to water frequently is linked to land rights, and in many parts of the world, women's right to own or inherit land is prohibited or restricted. In areas of high male-migration, female-headed households are particularly vulnerable since women must assume traditionally male responsibilities of farm management

without having access to necessary resources such as credit and extension services, or participating in governance institutions, such as water user associations.

In contexts of drought and floods, traditional risk sharing and risk-coping mechanisms like reliance on kin and social networks are not adequate if entire areas are affected. Poor women and men are often forced to sell assets such as land and livestock—or even their children as bonded labour or trafficking—pushing them further into impoverishment. Women, without land as collateral, are often inhibited from accessing credit facilities and forced to rely on moneylenders charging exorbitant rates of interest. Loss of assets, an inability to provide for their families, and relocation to safe grounds away from their homes and familial ties, leads to severe psychosocial impacts on women and men, hindering their capacities to cope.

Governance

Governance and decision-making processes for adaptation and disaster management affect the capacity of women and men to cope with and mitigate climate impacts. Limited planning and weak institutional responses—for example, inadequate early warning systems and provision of health services—can magnify the adverse impacts of water-related disasters such as floods.

Furthermore there is often a disjuncture between national level plans and policies and local level realities, resulting in a lack of relevance and applicability of adaptation plans at the local level. Participation in decision-making processes for adaptation and disaster management—whether at community, national or international levels—is generally unequal for women and men. As a result, gender specific priorities and concerns may not be included in short and long-term decision making on adaptation climate change.

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