

# Climate change hits poor women

When rivers dry up in Africa the journey to the nearest water post becomes longer – which means less time for girls to go to school. When villages are flooded in Asia, you die if you are, as a woman, not allowed to be seen alone and in wet clothes among unfamiliar men.



Illustration photo: Colourbox

They were waiting for their husbands to return from work at sea or on the land, when a gigantic wave suddenly appeared on the horizon, swelled in overland and changed their lives in the course of a few minutes.

When the tsunami hit the coasts of Indonesia on 26 December 2004, thousands of houses, villages and human lives were smashed to smithereens. By far most of the lives that were lost were the lives of women. More than 75 per cent of the deceased in Aceh, the worst hit area of Indonesia, were women, as is shown in studies by the British organisation Oxfam International.

According to Oxfam, it was more difficult for women than for men to flee from the massive bodies of water, and in contrast with the men, they were mostly in their houses.

The tsunami underlined an old problem: men and women have different living conditions, and it follows that incidents such as natural disasters have different affects on the two genders. The impact of global climate change has now made this basic problem more topical than ever.

## Women among the most vulnerable

The future prospects for the earth warn of significantly changed weather. Many more natural disasters are lying in wait, according to the crystal balls of climate researchers. In addition it is predicted that the weather in general will become more extreme. Droughts, heat waves and floods are some of the concrete forms that the future changed climate will take.

This will have a negative impact on the poor areas of the world particularly for two main reasons.

Firstly, because a large proportion of the extreme weather changes and natural disasters will take place in these areas. According to Oxfam, countries in the third world were hit by as many as 94 per cent of the globe's natural disasters between 1990 and 1998.

Secondly, because the main source of livelihood in the developing countries is farming and farming will be direly affected by droughts and floods. Poor people who live off farming will, in the worst case, have crops neither to sell nor to eat, and they will not have a social security to fall back on. Furthermore, climate change will affect individuals in these poor areas in various ways – all according to their gender.



Illustration photo: Colourbox

have to go even further up the mountain to find new areas to cultivate. If a river where African women fetch water for their households dries up, they might have to walk several kilometres to the next one. This can imply danger.

“Since there is a disproportionate number of women in poverty in developing countries and societies which are very dependent on local natural resources, women will also be disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change”, says Ulrike Röhr, spokeswoman for Gender cc, a global network for gender and climate, established during the UN Climate Conference COP12 on Bali, and consisting of NGOs and UN organisations.

In many developing countries the women are the main actors in the home and in the production of food in agriculture. Therefore their workload will grow as the weather changes. If the mountain area where a South American woman grows potatoes changes, she will likely

“We already see in countries with conflicts, such as Congo and Sudan that most sexual assaults on women take place when they are outside cultivating their crops or fetching water. If they are to go even further away from home in future, their safety is at risk”, says Maria Glinvad from the Danish NGO KULU, which cooperates closely with particularly African women’s organisations within the field of gender and climate.

## **The battle over water**

It is not, however, only in the countryside that women will feel the impact of climate change. In towns also and everywhere where water is used, climate change presages a new era. If there is less water to use, there will, correspondingly, be more conflict over the water. And the losers will be those with the least financial and political resources – the poor, and particularly poor women.

This is shown in an extensive research project run by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). Researchers have explored both conflicts and cooperation over water during ten years in five regions in the world; for example in Nicaragua. Although Nicaraguan water legislation says that drinking water is to be prioritized over water for irrigation of land and watering cattle, the competition for water often in practice ends in the opposite being the case. Large cattle and vegetable producers win the battle for water over poor women, who wish to use water for washing clothes or cooking.

“So women must make do with less water or water of a poorer quality. If climate change is going to mean larger variations in the amount of water, the challenges faced by women will also be harder to solve. As, for example, in the case where the river where they fetch water is fenced in by a competitor for the water”, says Dr Helle Munk Ravnborg, who leads the research project “Competing for Water” and is head of the DIIS research unit on Natural Resources and Poverty.

## **Gender equality endangered**

Many fear that the particular effects of climate change for women will have long-term consequences for gender equality.

When there is less time to do the chores, a woman typically keeps one daughter at home from school to take care of the work in the household she herself cannot do because she, for example, must walk a longer distance to fetch water. Regardless of where in the world you look, boys are being prioritized when it comes to education”, says Maria Glinvad of KULU.

More work results in less access to education and the labour market outside of the home. And if climate change also makes more people ill, this will mean extra work for women, who traditionally take care of the children, the sick and the elderly. In some developing countries women also run a greater risk of falling ill than men, since they have poorer health and less access to health care services.

According to the World Bank, in Bangladesh, which has experienced several natural disasters, the average length of life is shorter among women than among men, since their state of health is poorer. Therefore women in the country are also hit harder than men by natural disasters.

## **The consequences of gender roles**

Bangladesh is one of the countries in the world that has both widespread poverty and a high probability of being affected by the threat of climate change, as well as by natural disasters. The country is already regularly hit by tropical cyclones and is periodically flooded. The UN Climate Panel has issued a warning that the situation will get worse if the water level of the sea rises and the ice melts in the Himalayas. This would be a fatal development for women.

Of those who died during the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, 90 per cent were women. According to experts, this is due to religious habits and attitudes to women in the mainly Muslim society.

Oxfam has published a report entitled *Gender, Development and Climate Change* (2002), which explores the high mortality rate among women in Bangladesh. It claims that many women died during the cyclone because in consideration of codes of honour they could not go outside without a male relative to seek cover in shelters such as madrasahs (Koran schools), where they would have had to be in the company of unknown men. Therefore many women died in their homes, where they were waiting for a male relative to come and fetch them.

Women could also not be seen in public spaces such as shelters or other places where they could have sought help, as they were dressed in wet clothes, which they naturally were as a result of the flood. Their clothes also made it difficult for them to flee from the floods, and in addition very few women can swim, since it is not considered to be an activity appropriate for females.

Therefore the Bangladeshi UN Ambassador was one of those who demanded gender to be included in the global climate debate, as the UN Women’s Commission gathered for its 52nd meeting in 2008.

“Climate change is not a gender neutral phenomenon. Women and children are generally more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Therefore a gender perspective must urgently be integrated into the climate debate”, said Ismat Jahan, the Bangladeshi UN Ambassador.

The experiences of Bangladesh showed how great a role gender plays in the survival process during a natural disaster. But they also showed how important it is to wear gender glasses when preventing disasters; the women in Bangladesh had not received any prior warning of the approaching cyclone. The official warnings never reached the women, since they were given to men in public places and seldom communicated on to the women and the rest of the family.

### **The need to be better informed**

Access to knowledge, information, warnings and meteorological weather forecasts is precisely what several climate experts point to as one of the most important things for poor people in the world, if they are to be able to adapt to a changing climate.

The international expert group Commission on Climate Change and Development, which was appointed by the Swedish Government in 2007, has published its final report in 2009. The Commission has, among other things, investigated how poor developing countries can adapt to future climate changes and reduce the risks of humanitarian catastrophes. Their conclusion was that the poor must have access to knowledge. They must be empowered so that they are better prepared for the climate changes.

In Mali, for example, the farmers are used to the rains starting when the storks have returned from Europe. But what will happen if the storks no longer arrive? How are the people then to get information on what the weather will be like? And what about the crops that cannot stand too much drought or water?

“I have a garden, and I can go to a nursery to find out what flowers I should plant when the meteorologists say it’s going to be a wet summer. The poor don’t have access to this kind of information – for example to regional weather forecasts or to expertise as to which crops they can start growing that can withstand droughts,” says Nana Hvidt, Director of DIIS and member of the Commission on Climate Change and Development.

Some information does already exist in these countries, but it is not being passed on to those that would benefit from it.

“This naturally affects the women, since they, as it is, have even less access to information and historically fewer rights than the men.”

## **Included in decision making**

Women should, on the whole, be much more involved in the decision making processes in the climate battle, if society is not to disintegrate when the climate changes occur – this is demanded by both NGOs and female politicians. But so far this has not always been the case.

As a step forward in the climate battle, all countries have established particular policies to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by, for example, investing in alternative energy sources. Several countries have also protected forest areas which are essential for reducing the greenhouse effect.

But this has consequences for the women, if they can no longer fetch fuel in the forest as they are used to. They must then walk even further – or find alternative ways of earning money. And even if some of the projects designed to mitigate the effects of climate change include the creation of new jobs to make up for lost income, women's needs are not always thought of.

In Bolivia, a large and prestigious climate project was started in 1996 in San Ignacio de Velasco, Santa Cruz. The Noel Kempff Mercado Climate Action Project is the world's largest forest based CO<sub>2</sub> project. Its aim was to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and create sustainable development by buying land in the Amazons for expanding the Noel Kempff National Park.

But the women were left out of all the important decision making bodies, as shown by a study from the University of East Anglia in Norwich, where Dr Emily Boyd examined the project from gender perspectives. The board set up for the National Park included no female members. All of the NGO leaders were men. Only a few women participated in the public meetings. And the jobs that were created when the area was to be turned into a national park, were almost all given to men.

This meant that it became difficult for the women to make ends meet, not least if they were the only wage earner in the household. The men, for instance, decided that the local community should now establish large cattle ranches as a new earning model. However, the households with women as single breadwinners could not participate in the project, as they could not contribute with male labour for the hard physical work.

Their problems were not taken into account, either. Several women complained of contaminated water in the water pumps. This is an issue with a widespread general impact. But the men simply listened to the complaints and then instead chose to discuss cattle and boat loans, so the water problem was never solved.

Climate change poses great challenges for women in developing countries. But it can also be a source of inspiration for renewal – and in the end perhaps for more gender equality.

“The positive story that we are now increasingly hearing from our African cooperation partners is that climate change creates new female entrepreneurs. African women share new knowledge and experiences across country borders – if something works in Mali, it will certainly work also in Tanzania or Kenya”, says Maria Glinvad from the Danish organisation KULU.

## **Positive developments**

In South Africa women have learnt to make their own solar energy cells, so they can produce their own energy. This knowledge they pass on to other women. The cells are both used in their homes and can be sold to others.

In Mali women who live off farming have successfully experimented with a new crop that can stand extreme weather conditions: they are now growing nut bushes. The bushes can be used as firewood; the nuts are ground to a cream and sold to be used for beauty products.

“The women become independent and participate in starting a sustainable consumer product. But this requires that they must receive financing, if the positive development is to continue”, says Maria Glinvad.

When Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, spoke in Liberia in West Africa in March, her message to the women was also that they can become new role models in a world where the climate is changing.

“Women can be real agents for change in their homes, their communities, and in the society as a whole. They can take over new renewable forms of house hold energy, such as biomass, biogas, solar. They tackle climate change as consumers, as educators. Through their specific role in educating their children, they can promote behavioural change in human or economic and environmental activities”, she said.

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