

Women and the Environment

1. Global commitments

The Beijing *Platform for Action* notes the linkages among poverty, natural disasters, health problems, unsustainable development and gender inequalities. It notes the importance of a holistic and multidisciplinary approach in dealing with environmental issues.¹ The *Platform for Action* sets out three strategic objectives.

In 2005, the Governing Body of UNEP adopted a decision that called upon Government and UNEP to mainstream gender perspectives into their environmental policies and programmes, to assess the effects on women of environmental policies, and to integrate further gender equality and environmental considerations into their work.

3. Gaps and challenges

Since 1995, there has been serious and rapid deterioration in the health of the planet: climate change, pollution, rising extinction rates (for both flora and fauna), deforestation, contaminated air and water, increase in natural disasters, and rapid urbanisation. Yet very few countries reporting on progress since 1995 identified this area as a priority for action.¹⁵ INSTRAW noted in its review of progress, “regrettably, the strategic objectives of Critical Area K [women and environment] remain well out of reach.”¹⁶ This section looks at a few of challenges that remain in implementing the *Platform for Action* strategic objectives.

Women’s Participation in Decision-Making Processes – at all levels

Despite progress, women continue to be under-represented in decision-making processes on the environment at all levels – international, national and local. Some of the reasons include their high illiteracy rates, limited access to natural resources, lack of information and training, stereotypical attitudes regarding their roles as well as insufficient research on gender equality and environment, lack of sex-disaggregated data and political commitment.¹⁷

Women’s limited participation in decision-making processes relate to almost all environmental sectors. Obstacles to their participation include the lack of secure access to land, adverse financial conditions, women’s time constraints, public policy traditionally focused on the male population as head of household and gender division of labour along socio-cultural norms.¹⁸

Gender Perspectives in Climate Change

One of the most urgent environmental issues today is climate change. The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported in early 2007 that global warming is ‘unequivocal’ and that human activity is the main driver of this activity.¹⁹ To date, however, there has been little discussion on the gender dimensions of this threat and strategies to deal with it.²⁰

Some authors have pointed out that since the poor are the most vulnerable to the impact of climate change, then women, as a disproportionate percentage of the poor, are particularly vulnerable. Given increased environmental instability, women will face particular challenges given their primary care-giving roles in times of disaster and environmental stress. Despite these challenges, many women have developed adaptive strategies to protect the sustainability of their environments and livelihoods. For example, poor nomadic women may have a relatively high adaptive capacity because of their intimate knowledge of their natural environment.²¹

Some analysts have argued that gender inequalities and roles are also relevant variables in tackling climate change in northern countries as well. Research from Germany also indicates that there are gender differences in attitudes and perceptions of climate change, and these are relevant in developing strategies to address this issue.²²

It is clear that we do not know enough about gender aspects of climate change, particularly in the north. More research and sex-disaggregation of data is required.

- (Adjust government priorities so that awareness and promotion of gender equality are integrated into financial planning
- (Improve institutional capacities to incorporate gender-related environmental analysis. UNEP points out that “much of modern environmental analysis is framed by the technical/scientific paradigm and relies mostly on quantitative biophysical data. Much of the work on gender and environment, on the other hand, is framed by a social science approach relying more on qualitative, case study narratives, and anecdotal evidence. Merging these two paradigms will be a challenge.”²⁸
- (Support the explicit commitment to bring issues of gender equality into the environmental arena.

This section looks at how these general strategies can be applied in specific environmental areas. It is meant to inspire and illustrate, rather than provide an exhaustive list of possible actions and entry points.

Expanding women’s participation in restoring drylands²⁹

In many of the world’s drylands, women’s traditional roles and knowledge in natural resource management and food security are crucial. Yet, women often face specific constraints as they care for their families and attempt to ensure sustainable use of the land, including limited access to productive assets, inability to participate in decision-making and exclusion from agricultural extension services. One review of experiences highlights the importance of understanding women’s workloads and responsibilities, their knowledge, their access to productive assets (land, water, livestock), their access to extension and support services, the availability of financial services and access to markets and women’s participation in decision-making.

In particular the review highlights three important strategies in combating desertification.

- (*Strengthen rural poor women’s organisations*: In addition to addressing the practical needs of women, it is also important to strengthen women’s organisations so that women’s role in decision-making and planning can be strengthened.
- (*Capacity building to create enabling environments*: Capacity gaps exist both within women’s organisations and within local and national authorities work

Niger: Reducing Drought Vulnerability

A joint initiative of the Government of Niger and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Project for the Promotion of Local Initiative for Development, in Aguié included a gender equality component. The area around Aguié is characterised by drought, chronic malnutrition and low incomes. Vulnerability affects more women than men because of the increasing economic responsibilities, lower education levels and heavier workloads of women.

The project introduced innovative strategies proposed by the local communities.

Support for small and medium livestock breeding. Women's groups received inputs to start goat breeding and participated in testing specific initiatives, such as the use of goat manure as a fertiliser. This approach resulted in income generation and increased yields.

Support for seed multiplication. Given low rainfalls, short-cycle, high production seeds were required.

Development of income-generating initiatives among women.

In this case the diversification of crop biodiversity and the active participation of women contributed to improved food security.

Source: IFAD (2006) *Gender and Desertification*.³¹

Ensuring gender equality perspectives in water supply and sanitation

Experience has shown that women's empowerment and the improvement of water supply, sanitation facilities and hygiene practice are inextricably linked.³² Access to safe drinking water is a human right and essential for achieving gender equality. Numerous tools and resources exist which explore the gender dimensions of water supply and sanitation (and integrated water resources more generally).³³ International meetings and experts have developed a lengthy list of strategies and recommendations, including:

- (strengthen legislation and mobilize resources for increasing access to safe water and adequate sanitation (including enacting and reinforcing water legislation that promotes small-scale water development, gives priority to water allocation for basic domestic and productive waters needs; introducing affirmative action plans to ensure that a minimum percentage (such as 30 per cent) of women participate in decision making from cabinet down to village levels);
- (facilitate access to land and water for productive purposes (including recognizing women's key roles in agriculture, as well as their responsibilities in livestock, fisheries and watersheds; according women equal rights to inherit land...);

- (promote sanitation (including addressing the needs of men and women for sanitation and hygiene); and
- (develop capacity (of women to participate and of men and women to understand differential needs and aspiration of all groups).

Women and Water Users Committees in Brazil

In the Rio Gaviao region of Brazil, a community development project, supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), required that new and existing water user committees take in women as members. The project included a strong training component (with over 40 per cent women) and the formation of separate water users committees for women.

As a result, water security in dryland area was improved and led to significant increase in water available for use in the home and for livestock, and reduced workloads of women and young people.

Source: IFAD (2006). *Gender and Desertification*.³⁴

Linking reductions in women's workloads with environmentally sound practices

The synergies between gender equality, environmental sustainability and the energy sector were first recognized in relation to biomass energy. Women were recognized as users and collectors of fuel wood, and as victims of environmental deterioration that caused energy scarcity. Time use surveys have shown that women spend long hours in fuel collection.³⁵

One of the seven priorities identified by the Millennium Project to make progress on MDG3 is to invest in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls time burdens. The examples below show that there are ways that this can be done that also support environmentally sound practices.

- (Upesi Rural Stoves in Kenya: This project aimed to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural households through the use of fuel-saving wood-burning stoves. The benefits also included improved health and time savings for users of the stoves as well as relief from the pressures caused by wood fuel shortages.³⁶
- (In Malawi, the Ndirande Nkhuni Biomass Briquette Programming trained women's groups to produce briquettes from waste materials as an alternative fuel source.³⁷
- (In the Sudan, a project has given priority to community and extension activities that have eased the duties of firewood collection among women through the provision of energy-saving gas cylinders and stoves.³⁸

Strengthening women's participation in biodiversity and conservation management

Studies have shown that women and men often have different knowledge of plants, seeds and natural resource use, and that women's knowledge is often overlooked by planners and policy makers. Various initiatives have tried to overcome this bias and recognize and building on women's work with natural resources. For example, in Colombia, an initiative involving the promotion and adoption of bean varieties discovered the critical importance of involving women in the process. Women were responsible for the preparation of food for the farmhands working on their husbands' land. Given labour force shortages, providing good food made it easier to secure labour. Women had definite criteria regarding preferred bean varieties (different than those of men). When women were consulted on the varieties to be tested, their selections proved to be highly popular.³⁹

Organic Cosmetics Made From Medicinal Plants

In the late 1990s, the community of San Miguel de Guatuso in Costa Rica was faced with serious environment problems: soil exhaustion and agrochemical contamination, deforestation, water contamination and an exhaustion of headwaters.

A group of women, encouraged by initial success in pr

programmes). Research shows that each channel of land ownership has a gender bias: male preference in inheritance, male privilege in marriage, gender inequality in the land market and male bias in state programmes of land administration.”⁴³

Although noting that strategies for increasing women’s access to land must be context specific, the Millennium Project suggests four areas to explore.⁴⁴

- (*Reforming laws and supporting women’s claims to property.* Legal reform, including in constitutional provisions, family law and property law, to ensure consistency with the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, and measures to ensure enforcement of these legal provisions.
- (*Joint titling.* Formal registration of property in both the husband’s and wife’s names.
- (*Collective approaches to support women’s access to land.* Various types of collective ownership and production as alternatives to strengthening women’s access to land.
- (*International action.* International organisations and networks have provided momentum to national movements aimed at strengthening women’s property and inheritance rights.

Joint titling to land in Viet Nam

In 2001, Viet Nam revised its marriage and family law so that both spouses’ signatures are required on any documents registering family assets and land use rights. With joint title, women are protected in case of widowhood, separation or divorce.

The Vietnamese government, in cooperation with the World Bank, selected two communes for a pilot project to reissue land title certificates with joint signatures. The project organized village meetings and distributed leaflets about the new w j, Tc 0.0032 T7 0 -1.3330 Td22.2Bank, sces 2,6e onho-5(etddd d j)8)10()Tj/TT0/P boet 2 ev6(l)a-5(etua)Tdy b

- (incorporate both women and men into the decision-making framework on climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives;
- (support vulnerability reduction measures which target women's needs;
- (facilitate extension studies, particularly for women, to improve the accessibility and use of new, environmentally sustainable technologies; and
- (support the development and use of tools, including vulnerability assessments, that build on local and indigenous knowledge, held by women and men, of measures to adapt to or mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Climate Change and Gender Equality in China

One goal of the Canada-China Cooperation in Climate Change initiative is to increase the contribution of women by empowering them to participate equally in the development and implementation of climate change related policies and programmes.

Specific objectives include:

Increase awareness of gender inequalities and support for women's full participation in decision-making and technical activities associated with climate change;

Increase the capacity to analyse gender equality issues relevant to the project and incorporate the results of the analysis into project activities;

Develop and implement appropriate targets for male/female participation in project activities, based on sex-disaggregated baseline research (the minimum expectation is 30 per cent participation by women; and

Increase the awareness, abilities, self-confidence and motivation of women working to address the issue of climate change.

Source: CIDA (nd). *Gender Equality and Climate Change*⁵¹

Building women's participation into *National Action Programmes* to implement environmental conventions⁵²

The United Nations Convention on Desertification and Drought (UNCDD) is one environmental convention which explicitly recognizes the important role played by women. There are lessons in the way this Convention has moved forward that could be applied in the implementation of other environmental conventions.

Under the UNCDD, a major responsibility of states parties is the establishment of a National Action Programme (NAP) in partnership with civil society. The full participation of women and men is an explicit, important principle for the NAPs. By 2003, more than 56 countries had presented NAPs. A review of these NAPs found that the vast majority of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean had made progress on this dimension of the Convention. For example, more than seven countries outlined detailed programme areas specifically for women's empowerment or gender mainstreaming. Other NAPs included the participation of women as one of the overall objectives of the NAPs.

Some NAPs (such as Uganda and Zambia) drew on national commitments to women's participation or gender mainstreaming. Some countries (such as Senegal and Mongolia) made significant efforts to involve women's organisations. Capacity building was an important

element for several countries (such as Benin and Mali). The NAP from Ethiopia outlined how male extension agents would be trained on gender aspects in dryland development programmes.

Although as of 2004, there were still weaknesses in the NAPs (often relating to specific indicators and benchmarks), this process is still considered an

Reports and tools

- (Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) (2005). *Women and Water. Women 2000 and Beyond*. This publication provides a useful overview of gender equality issues throughout the water sector. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/feb05.pdf (accessed 9 July 2007).
- (Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) (2004). *Making Risky Environments Safer*. This publication explores gender equality issues in the context of disaster reduction. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/w2000-natdisasters-e.pdf (accessed 9 July 2007).
- (IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) (2006). *Gender and Desertification: Expanding Roles for Women to Restore Drylands*. This publication looks at the impact of desertification on women and their role in the management of natural resources and drylands. It looks at lessons learned and provides recommendations for expanding women's roles in order to restore dryland areas. www.ifad.org/pub/gender/desert/gender_desert.pdf (accessed 9 July 2007).
- (INSTRAW (2005) *Women and the Environment: New Challenges. Beijing at 10: Putting Policy into Practice*. This document provides a review of progress and gaps on this critical area since 1995. www.un-instraw.org/en/index.php?option=content&task=blogcategory&id=148&Itemid=175 (accessed 9 July 2007).
- (UNEP/WEDO (2004). *Women and the Environment*. This overview document explores the gender dimensions of biodiversity, desertification, water management and environmental policies. It provides examples of women's activism on environmental issues from around the world. www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=397&ArticleID=4489&l=en (accessed 9 July 2007).

Notes

¹ See for example, paragraphs 246 to 252.

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- ⁷ Report of the first Global Women's Assembly on the Environment: Women as the Voice for the Environment, held at the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Nairobi, from 11 to 13 October 2004. UNEP/DPDL/WAVE/1, www.un-ngls.org/cso/cso5/final_report.doc (accessed 9 July 2007).
- ⁸ See, for example, UNEP (2004) *Women and the Environment*. Nairobi: UNEP, WEDO and the United Nations Foundation. www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=397&ArticleID=4489&l=en (accessed 9 July 2007).
- ⁹ United Nations (2004). *Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century."* Report of the Secretary-General. E/CN.6/2005/2, para.437.
- ¹⁰ UNEP (2004) *Women and the Environment*. Nairobi: UNEP, WEDO and the United Nations Foundation. www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=397&ArticleID=4489&l=en (accessed 9 July 2007).
- ¹¹ IUCN (2002). *The Unavoidable Current: Gender Policies for the Environmental Sector in Mesoamerica*. San Jose, Costa Rica.

²⁴ See Archibald, Linda and Mary Crnkovich (1999)

⁴² UN Millennium Project (2005).