

# Transformative, participatory approaches to gender, climate change and sustainable livelihoods in India

GEORGINA ABOUD

IN BHEERAPANI, a small, remote village in the Nainital district in the central Himalayas, the Community Awareness Centre (CAC) promotes environmentally sustainable livelihoods through processes such as forest protection and organic farming. Its participatory approach engages local people in developing effective, locally-owned solutions to climate change, fostering their initiatives rather than setting rigid project goals.

As part of these processes, CAC encourages discussion of gender inequalities and empowers women by raising awareness of their rights over resources and knowledge systems. The tiny NGO, which is run by only four people on a shoestring budget, has facilitated amazing transformations against the backdrop of climate change in India. It has inspired women to become local leaders in climate-related issues and advocates of more sustainable organic farming. It has also helped to shift perceptions of gender roles.

## Women leading the way in forest protection

The forests in the area, which have been a major source of support and income to the villagers and primarily women's livelihoods, have come under increasing threat. About ten years ago, under government-run schemes, the villagers switched from growing resilient traditional crops which fed people and livestock, to non-traditional cash crops which were less resilient and provided less fodder for feeding their animals. As a consequence, villagers began using forests as a source of animal feed as well as for firewood, contributing to deforestation – with implications for climate change.

Participatory exercises run by CAC helped local women to realise that protecting the forest to promote climate change mitigation and environmental sustainability was the responsibility of all people in the locality. They also realised how little decision-making power women had in public matters and began to question this inequality. For Parvati Nyal – a farmer and housewife in her late fifties – this was a defining moment. Participating in workshops run by CAC on leadership, advocacy, empowerment, sustainable



Parvati, leader of the Forest Panchayat in Nainital district (Georgina Aboud)

development and food security, gave Parvati the confidence to stand for – and win – the leadership of the local Forest Panchayat (formal forest committee), becoming its first female head. Although there was resistance from some members of the community and the committee itself, a respected local CAC member strongly supported Parvati, as did women and young people.

Despite women's legal right to participate in the local Panchayat, their role up until that point had been limited and tokenistic. Parvati played a key role in changing this situation by encouraging women to actively participate in the committee, to hold the leaders of Forest Panchayats responsible for their actions and to demand financial transparency. She introduced rules and regulations which included fines for cutting even small branches from forest trees. In Parvati's words:

'I brought a sense of responsibility that wasn't held by the men who were running the forest before ... My leadership isn't about just enforcing regulations but changing people's perception of the forest as an important resource through education and understanding.'

## Women leading the way in organic farming

The reduction in steady rainfall patterns has coincided with the increasing promotion of cash crops, which rely on fertilisers and pesticides, and require more water. CAC ran an experimental farm to

explore the benefits of organic farming as an alternative to these non-traditional crops and resource-intensive farming techniques. The experimental farm showed that traditional crops not only tasted better, were more nutritious and lasted longer, but could be farmed organically and were more resilient to unpredictable weather conditions.

With their confidence boosted through CAC's empowerment activities, a number of local women led the way, persuading their households to change to these organic farming methods. The traditional crops now provide cattle feed and fodder that women would otherwise have to spend time searching for in the forest.

## Changing attitudes

Part of the CAC ethos is to provide space for women and men to challenge their ideas on female and male roles, responsibilities and rights, in workshops, meetings and empowerment programmes. Not only have women become more empowered at household and committee level to speak and be heard, but men's attitudes to women have also undergone a fundamental shift. One male farmer said that, before working with CAC, he would not have considered it appropriate for a woman to own land, but now he thinks: 'When a woman has control or owns the land she never misuses it but uses it to improve the condition of the family.' In other cases women's husbands had started taking on household chores so that their wives would have time to attend meetings.

## Lessons

CAC's success is partly attributed to its efforts to create real participation and ownership by the villagers it works with, and ensure that women play a key role in decision-making. Their experience shows that in local contexts, communities are usually best placed to define issues and explore solutions, and that women's knowledge is an extremely important part of this process.

CAC's experience also indicates that, while resources are badly needed to support local-level responses to gender, climate change and environmental issues, funding needs to be flexible and leave room for innovation.

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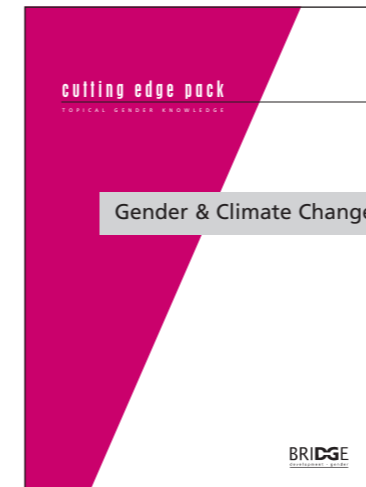
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## INBRIEF

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GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

# INBRIEF

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## Gender & Climate Change

### IN THIS ISSUE:

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Climate change is increasingly being recognised as a global crisis, but responses to it have so far been overly focused on scientific and economic solutions. How then do we move towards more people-centred, gender-aware climate change policies and processes? How do we respond to the different needs and concerns of women and men, and also challenge the gender inequalities that mean women are more likely to lose out than men in the face of climate change? This *In Brief* sets out why it is vital to address the gender dimensions of climate change. It maps pathways for making climate change responses more gender aware and – potentially – transformative. It includes inspiring examples of local, gender-aware innovations in Colombia and India. The case studies have been produced collaboratively through participatory workshops, semi-structured interviews and site visits with FUNDAEXPRESIÓN in Colombia and the Community Awareness Centre (CAC) in India. FUNDAEXPRESIÓN plays a key role in promoting strong local networks to create resilience to climate change and CAC engages women and men in developing relevant solutions that empower women.

## Gender & Climate Change: an overview

EMMELINE SKINNER  
AND  
ALYSON BRODY

'THE ABSENCE of women, particularly those from the global South, from national and international discussions and decision-making on climate change and development must change. The battle to protect the environment is not solely about technological innovation – it is also about empowering women and their communities to hold their governments accountable for results.'

Mary Robinson and Wangari Maatbai  
(*Huffington Post*, 2010)

### What is climate change and why is it a development issue?

Climate change refers to the increasingly erratic weather patterns, rising sea levels and extreme events, that may be attributed to human activity and the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that have created global warming. It is often viewed as a purely scientific and technical phenomenon, and yet climate change is also a social, economic

and political issue with profound implications for social justice and gender equality.

As weather patterns become increasingly unpredictable and extreme events such as floods, heat waves or natural disasters become more common, the poorest women and men in the developing South – who have contributed the least to the problem – find their livelihoods most threatened, yet have the weakest voice and least influence on climate policy. And, as the examples from Colombia and India in this *In Brief* show, it is women living in poor, often rural areas, with less access to assets and employment opportunities, who are often hit the hardest.

### What are the gender dimensions of climate change?

Women and men do not experience climate change equally. Pre-existing gender inequalities mean that neither their contributions to the carbon emissions responsible for climate change,

nor the way that they experience its effects, are the same. In many developing countries economic constraints and cultural norms that restrict women's access to paid employment mean that their livelihoods are particularly dependent on climate-sensitive sectors, such as subsistence agriculture or water collection. Yet gender inequalities in the distribution of assets and opportunities mean their choices are severely constrained in the face of climate change.

The fact that women and girls are often responsible for most of the unpaid care tasks around the household also means their lives are directly affected by the changes brought about by climate change. They often have to walk further to find increasingly scarce food, fuel and water, as well as caring for family members who are susceptible to the health risks linked to climate change. As a result, women and girls find themselves with less time for education, income-generating activities or participation in community decision-making processes, further entrenching unequal gender relations.

Men are also negatively affected by climate change, particularly when they are poor. They may experience deep anxiety and stress when their rural livelihoods are undermined as a result of climate change and they are no longer able to fulfil their socially-expected roles as providers. Research also indicates that men may feel pressured into taking 'heroic' actions which places them at a higher risk than women and children. For example, after Hurricane Mitch hit Central America in October 2000, a higher proportion of men than women were killed due to risk-taking behaviour.

#### Why do gender dimensions need to be at the centre of climate change policy?

##### *'Adding' gender dimensions to policies is not enough*

The international climate change architecture is complex and constantly shifting as new agreements come into being, or existing ones are amended. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the overarching international framework for addressing climate change, and was the first to acknowledge the role of human interference in the climate system and the need to address carbon

**Mitigation:** Human interventions to reduce the sources or enhance activities that remove greenhouse gases (which trap heat and keep the earth warm). Examples include switching to solar energy or wind power and expanding forests to remove greater amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

**Adaptation:** Actions taken to help communities and ecosystems cope with changing climate conditions, such as the construction of flood walls to protect property from sea level rise, or the planting of agricultural crops and trees more suited to warmer temperatures and drier soil conditions.

*(based on definitions from UNFCCC website)*

emissions. Despite referring to human activity the UNFCCC makes no reference to gender at any point.

However, persistent lobbying by gender and climate change advocates such as the global network GenderCC and other civil society organisations has led to recent positive shifts in the climate change architecture. The Bali Action Plan, created at the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) 13 in 2007, provides entry points for taking gender issues into account, while in 2008 the UNFCCC Secretariat was persuaded of the need to include gender-specific recommendations in conference documents.

These are positive steps but there is still a long way to go. Many climate change policies and processes are still largely gender blind, overlooking the gender dimensions of climate change or considering them irrelevant. Where gender issues are considered they are too often an 'add on' to existing policies, and only in the context of adaptation.

##### **Market-based policies remain gender blind**

It is policies around mitigation and low carbon development that are most gender blind. In particular the current dominant approach to reducing carbon emissions through market-based mechanisms, which provides economic incentives for the cutting of emissions or preservation of forests, fails to take account of the multiple social, cultural and economic factors that limit women's ability to participate in or benefit from markets.

This has been the case with forest protection measures such as REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). REDD enables industrialised countries to 'offset' their carbon emissions by paying governments for the conservation of forests, often in the developing South, to promote climate mitigation by preserving carbon stored in trees. This commercialisation of previously 'free' natural resources has been shown to lead to the further exclusion of poor and landless people, often women, who depend on products from the forests for their livelihoods, but rarely benefit from

the economic incentives. This is one of the issues being addressed by FUNDA-EXPRESIÓN (one of the organisations discussed in this *In Brief*) and global organisations such as the Global Forest Coalition.

##### **Women are not seen as part of the solution**

Where policies do take a gender perspective they often do so in ways that draw on assumptions and simplistic generalisations. For example, climate adaptation policies too often treat women only as vulnerable beneficiaries rather than rights-holding citizens who need to be recognised for the agency, skills and experience they can contribute. As the case studies in this *In Brief* show, women already play a crucial role in developing sustainable climate adaptation solutions. However, their contributions are often not recognised.

##### **There is a large gender gap in climate change decision-making**

It is the gender disparity in decision-making around climate change which is perhaps the most significant factor in the persistent gender blindness of climate change policies. At the most recent UNFCCC Conference of the Parties in 2010 (COP 16), for example, women accounted for as little as 30 per cent of all delegation parties and under 15 per cent of all heads of delegations.

##### **What needs to change?**

Climate change policies and processes will be neither effective nor fair unless they become more gender aware. This means recognising that development actors are women as well as men, that they are constrained in different and often unequal ways, and that they may consequently have differing, and sometimes conflicting needs and priorities (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996). Investing time and money into gathering gender-specific information – both qualitative and quantitative – is therefore paramount. Greater gender awareness also means recognising that women have the right to be included in climate change-related

#### How do we respond to the different needs and concerns of women and men, and also challenge the gender inequalities that mean women are more likely to lose out than men in the face of climate change?

decisions and to benefit from them equally.

However, simply being aware of gender inequalities is not enough; all climate change policies and interventions need to actively promote women's rights and gender equality in order to bring about change. Gender transformation should be both a potential end goal and an important condition of effective climate change responses and poverty reduction.

By transformation we mean a situation where women and men have an equal voice in decision-making on climate change and broader governance processes, and are given equal access to the resources necessary to respond to the negative effects of climate change; where both women's and men's needs and knowledge are taken into account, and where the broad social constraints that limit women's access to practical resources (such as agricultural support, technology, information, credit, energy and health services) and strategic resources (such as decision-making power and legal rights) no longer exist.

In addition to the vital lobbying work of national, regional and global organisations and networks at the policy level, many local organisations are already responding to women's and men's actual needs and promoting gender-aware, transformative approaches. It is imperative to create stronger links between global policy and these local-level realities and innovations to ensure that policies are informed by the voices of the women and men who deal with the consequences of climate change every day.

##### **Key recommendations for policymakers and donors**

##### **Change the way climate change and its responses are framed**

- Take into account the multiple dimensions of gender inequality and women's and men's experiences of climate change on the ground, and invest in research to enable this.
- Move beyond simple assumptions about women's vulnerability to highlight women's agency in adapting to and mitigating climate change. This will involve integrating women's valuable knowledge and practical experience into policy-making processes.
- Learn from people-focused, gender-transformative approaches at the local

level and apply these lessons to national and international policy.

- Promote a rights-based approach to climate change and ensure that all future climate change policies and processes draw on human rights frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
- Address the underlying causes of gender inequality, tackling issues such as unequal land rights through legislative reforms and awareness-raising, as well as through the implementation of CEDAW and other relevant frameworks.
- Find alternatives to market-based approaches where possible, but when they are used to address climate change mitigation, ensure they benefit women equally and do not exclude or further disadvantage them.

##### **Create gender-aware policies and institutions**

- Support climate change institutions to critically examine their own structures and processes, identifying and addressing ways in which they may create or reproduce gender inequalities, by using institutional audits and other mechanisms.
- Enable the equal participation of women in climate change processes at local, national and international levels.

##### **Create an enabling environment for people-focused, gender-transformative climate change**

- Continue to build the evidence base by gathering and analysing qualitative and quantitative information around the social and gender dimensions of climate change.
- Fund civil society institutions at international, national and local levels to hold climate change policymakers to account on their political commitments to gender equality.

## The power of local networks for gender-aware climate responses in Colombia

GEORGINA ABOUD



*Norma Henríquez with her seed collection*

*(Fernando Salazar Ferrier)*

children and a waterproof corrugated iron roof to keep the rain out. FUNDAEXPRESIÓN was contacted by AMMUCALE and organised a *minga* (a community work day) in which a septic tank was built for Martha. Since the disaster, Martha has also diversified her livelihood strategy by baking and selling bread. Members of AMMUCALE encouraged their communities and other organisations to buy the bread and support Martha through this difficult time. The support has enabled Martha to keep her eldest children, a boy and a girl, in school.

##### **Changing attitudes: women as leaders**

Although historically Santandarian women are known throughout Colombia as being strong and forthcoming, cultural norms mean that their voices are often marginalised in family and community decision-making. Many women are unable to attend meetings because of their responsibilities in the household, and when they do attend they are obliged to seek approval from their husbands before speaking. However, with support from these associations and networks such gender norms are being challenged, and it is increasingly recognised that effective climate change responses need women to actively participate in community decisions. Informal education, as well as leadership training, creates momentum for young women to challenge gender relations and livelihood strategies in their families and in their wider community.

At the age of 20 Laura joined the Agro-ecological Peasant School, encouraged by her local youth organisation. The School is a community network of organisations that provides a cost-free, flexible way of

learning and exchanging information on agricultural practices, and is held every one or two months at different farms. Inspired by what she had learned, Laura became a member of the Community Network of Forest Reserves, an association dedicated to working sustainably and conserving forests – an important aspect of tackling climate change. She has also motivated her family to begin agro-forestry farming practices on their 122 acre property, which has extensive Andean forest cover, and encouraged her community to think about mitigating the impacts of climate change and creating greater food autonomy.

##### **Women sharing innovations**

After attending the same Agro-ecological School, Norma Henríquez set up a small farm to enable her family to be self-sufficient in food as well as water. She and her husband had moved from the city and returned to the countryside as *neo-campesinos*. Their families had been farmers and they wanted to carry on the tradition of producing their own food. However, changes in the surrounding land and in the weather conditions made farming more difficult. They found many neighbouring farmers had sold their land to agri-business (poultry and pig-farming) or were producing pineapple as a cash crop, which was having detrimental effects on the soil and water supplies, causing widespread desertification. Additionally, the rainfall in the area was becoming highly unpredictable, with torrential downpours followed by weeks of drought.

Attending the school and receiving support from the strong women's

association in the area gave Norma the confidence and skills to construct a specialised 85 cubic meter capacity water tank, which now runs across her roof. This enables her to maximise the collection of precious rainfall. The water helps support her diverse crops, which include mangos, coconuts, avocados, beans, pumpkins and maize. Nothing is wasted: water that might not be clean enough to drink is used to wash clothes, while leaves, animal waste from the goats and chickens and ash from the fire are turned into compost – all techniques that were learnt in the community exchanges. She has also become a proud custodian of agro-biodiversity and ensures that seed exchanges occur at every community meeting. She said:

'Looking after the land is the most important task a woman has on this planet, because if we don't commit ourselves to caring for seeds, water and soil, our communities will suffer, and we will lose our autonomy and the possibility of feeding our own families.'

##### **Lessons**

The example of the associations and networks in Santander show the importance of forming strong alliances in the face of the impacts of climate change and widespread gender inequality. By providing practical support, building women's leadership and facilitating the exchange of women's experiences and knowledge, the networks have contributed to locally-relevant climate change responses that empower women and challenge gender norms.

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