

Briefing

Why gender equality is necessary for environmental sustainability

Introduction

The harmful impact caused by climate change is not distributed equally. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that poor women are disproportionately harmed by natural disasters in comparison to poor men, as a direct result of their low level of economic and social rights.

In the 2007 Asian Tsunami up to 80% of the lives lost were females and in that same year women and children made up three quarters of those displaced by rains and flooding across 18 African nations. Research by the London School of Economics concluded this is a direct consequence of women's low level of economic and social rights in countries in high gender inequality [1]. Girls are less likely to have been taught essential survival skills such as swimming or climbing. Rescue efforts often give preferential treatment to boys [2]. Women and girls in developing countries are on the front line of climate change and environmental degradation.

Empowering women is an essential part of achieving a fairer world for all.

Being on the front line of climate change gives them a unique voice with which to speak out against its impact and knowledge of the natural environment which can give valuable insights into how countries can adapt to minimise disaster risk [2] and enable sustainable development [3].

All around the world women are taking action to create sustainable outcomes through involvement in environmental projects and are empowering themselves in the process.

There is empirical evidence to suggest a positive link between empowerment of women and the adoption of environmental protection policies by national governments [4]. The UN describes gender equality and women's empowerment as central to achieving sustainable, people-centred development [5]. The link between women's empowerment and environmental issues was recognised explicitly at the 2012 UN Climate Change Conference in Doha, Qatar where it was decided that promotion of women's full and equal participation in international climate change negotiations was essential. The issue of gender and climate

For more than 40 years we've seen that the wellbeing of people and planet go hand in hand – and it's been the inspiration for our campaigns. Together with thousands of people like you we've secured safer food and water, defended wildlife and natural habitats, championed the move to clean energy and acted to keep our climate stable. Be a Friend of the Earth – see things differently.

change is now included as a standing item on the agenda at all UNFCCC climate change conferences [6].

The status of women's empowerment

The current status of women's empowerment across the world can be measured in regard to the spheres of government and politics, economics, access to public services, education, sexual and reproductive health rights and post conflict resolution. It cannot be disputed that women across the world continue to face discrimination with far reaching consequences.

Politically women are significantly under-represented, holding only 10% of positions in the legislative bodies across the world and this limits women's ability to influence political outcomes [7]. Women make up 6 out of 10 of the world's poorest people and thus there is great inequality between women and men's economic power. Despite performing 66% of the work, much of which is a disproportionate share of unpaid care work in the home and wider community, women earn only 10% of the world's income [8]. Women are often very poorly represented at the top of business in economic decision making institutions, such as government economic ministries and financial institutions [9].

Across the world women tend to face hurdles to accessing essential public services, such as education and healthcare [10]. Two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women [11]. The positive knock on effects of girls education include significant improvement in the areas of economic growth, employment, poverty, health, child and maternal mortality and fertility rates [12]. Education is crucial to achieving empowerment for women in all areas. Globally women and girls suffer from unequal access to healthcare. As a consequence many do not have good sexual and reproductive health or knowledge [13]. Furthermore the continuing high level of violence against women has been described by the World Health Organisation as "a global health problem of epidemic proportions" [14]. During and post conflict women's low level of political and social rights make them particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, as well as displacement, with women and children making up over 80% of the world's refugees [15].

Gender inequality is often overlooked

Despite widespread awareness of discrimination against women, the issue of gender inequality is often neglected within the mainstream discourse on sustainability. The gender inequality which exists globally means that women and men do not contribute to climate change and environmental degradation equally or in the same ways [16]. There is a gender gap in energy consumption levels, with studies showing that women in developed European countries eat less meat and drive shorter distances than men [17]. In developing countries poor women in particular have the lowest levels of consumption and carbon dioxide emissions [16].

The differences in lifestyle and consumption levels between women and men is primarily the result of the gender division between paid formal work and unpaid domestic labour and in levels of economic wealth in both the developed and developing world [18]. This can be seen to suggest that greater gender equality would lead to greater carbon dioxide emissions as women consume more. However sociological and political research has found that women are typically more likely to support environmental protection [4] and practice pro-environmental behaviors [19], findings which will be explored further below. Johnsson-Latham argues that gender must be recognised as a factor affecting consumption in order to

acknowledge which societal groups are the primary causers of climate change and environmental damage [16]. Failure to consider gender can be seen as a de facto argument that gender equality is not necessary for environmental sustainability.

The relationship between women's empowerment and the environment is often restricted to discussions on population with the argument that reducing birth rates by enabling women to have control over the number of children they have is central to achieving sustainability [20]. This is an important issue for women, but by discussing women's empowerment solely in regard to reducing birth rates, women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities. This perpetuates traditional gender roles and discounts the tremendous power and potential of women as agents of change in favour of sustainability.

Women and environmental politics

Political participation is one of the key mechanisms through which women can be empowered to act to promote sustainability. Empirical evidence suggests that women globally tend to be more inclined to hold pro-environmental values and are more inclined to participate in environmental movements. This pattern seems to hold across a variety of countries such as Germany, Russia, Australia, Norway, Spain and France. Women make up an estimated 60-80% of membership of mainstream environmental organizations [4]. These trends have been recognised by the executive director of UN Women Michelle Bachelet, who on these bases describes women's political participation and leadership as “fundamental, not only to gender equality, but to peace, democracy and sustainable development” [21].

A survey of over 500 women conducted by the Women's Institute and the Women's Environmental Network found that the overwhelming majority of respondents were very concerned about climate change. The women were in favour of much stronger action on climate change, more information on how to reduce our environmental impact, increased involvement of women in policy-making and greater representation of women in industry, science and parliament [22]. In a study of 22 countries women in most nations tended to practice more environmentally friendly behaviour such as recycling and choosing to drive less [19].

On the basis of state ratification of international environmental treaties and the percentage of women holding seats in legislators in 1999, research by Norgaard and York found that that “societies with greater representation of women in Parliament are more prone to ratify environmental treaties”. They highlighted the example of Norway, which has a strong record of women's empowerment and political representation, along with high level of state environmentalism [4]. Similar conclusions have been indicated by the research of Nugent & Sandra who found that there was evidence to strongly support the notion that increased representation of women in national governments has positive effect on creation of protected land areas by the state [19]. Evidence also shows that carbon dioxide emissions per capita are lower in nations where women have higher political status [23].

Although the findings of these pieces of research are not sufficient to unequivocally demonstrate a direct relationship between the empowerment of women and pro-environmental policies by governments, it can be seen to suggest a positive link between women and environmental issues which merits further research into how empowering women will help the cause of sustainability.

Women as agents of sustainable change

The argument that women's empowerment is an essential component to achieving a sustainable future is supported by the many cases where the actions of women has served to create socially just and environmentally sustainable outcomes. Case studies taken from India [24; 25; 3], Bangladesh and Nepal [3] illustrate how women's specific experience and knowledge is essential for sustainable development. Active participation can simultaneously promote increased status for women and good environmental policy.

In India women are taking action around the issue of energy, voicing their dissent through protests against unsustainable energy production and participating in alternative renewable energy projects, which in the process contribute to women's empowerment. Women played leading roles in the anti-dams movement against the building of a series of hydroelectric dams in the Narmada Valley, Gujarat which displace tens of thousands of people. It is likely that women bear a disproportionate share of the social costs such as displacement and many women have served time in prison as a result of their involvement in protests [24]. Similarly many women protested against the building of a coal-fired power plant in the state Odisha which pollutes fresh water and the coastal environment, enduring repeated police repression [24].

The women of the Bhopal survivors' movement, following the 1984 chemical plant disaster, challenged their traditional roles through protest for social and environmental justice. The disaster had a particularly negative impact upon women. Many were forced to now become the main breadwinner for their families, while others who were seriously injured lost the ability to work and some were abandoned by husbands or sons who were unable to pay their medical costs. The environmental pollution from the plant's toxic waste caused mothers milk to become poisoned and children were born with congenital defects [25]. The women felt that because they were female and uneducated their voices would not be listened to. However the leadership of the survivors' movement depended on the involvement of women in order for direct actions such as marches and candle light vigils to be successful. One woman described how their activism was an awareness raising experience for the women which "changed their perspective and revolutionised their thinking on development and politics". Researchers noted that telling their stories was an empowering act for the women because of the high value placed upon their experience and knowledge [25].

As well as challenging environmentally and socially unsustainable energy production, women are playing a significant part in renewable energy projects to provide an alternative to traditional fossil fuels and better serve their communities. They are undertaking training in skills including solar engineering through NGOs such as Barefoot College in Rajasthan [24]. Women had significant involvement in the building of a community owned hydroelectric project in the village of Udmara in the Ladakh region [24]. While other women, such as those in Karnataka, produce and sell clean cook stoves which use less polluting liquid fuel. Through these experiences women gain confidence, as well as higher status in their communities, and as a result are able to hold companies and organisations to account for their social and environmental damage [24].

Rural women in the developing world often have in-depth knowledge of their natural environment and are key to sustainable development efforts. Action Aid conducted research into how women in Bangladesh, India and Nepal all living in the Ganga river basin were

adapting to climate change. The women they spoke to had a clear sense of the ways in which their communities could better adapt to floods and consequently enable them to secure their livelihoods in the face of climate change. They cited their need for essential support from peers, authorities, professionals and NGOs to allow them to learn about crop diversification, adapted agricultural practices and alternate sources of incomes. They also called for better infrastructure, such as flood shelters for people and crop supplies and improved access to doctors, pharmacists, vets and agricultural extension services during the flood season [3]. This knowledge and understanding which women possess must be listened to and integrated into adaptation strategies in order to better support women.

Conclusion

There is a clear case for the importance of women's empowerment to attaining sustainability and the environmental movement must be challenged to recognise and act upon this. Women are disproportionately harmed by climate change, they are more likely to support and practice sustainable lifestyles and countries with higher proportions of female representatives are more environmentally friendly. Already women across the world are acting on sustainability issues at both the governmental and grassroots level and we must support and promote this work. Women's empowerment and gender equality are central to sustainability and dealing with climate change.

Rebecca Kirk

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