

# Gender and Climate Change

*By Kellie Tranter*  
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The recent spate of “natural” (or nowadays probably more correctly, “climate related”) disasters all over the world caused me to wonder whether their effects are evenly spread between the sexes. Logically, human beings of both sexes should react in much the same way to environmental threats, and in the absence of social factors, any differences in the effect of disasters between the sexes should be fairly small.

I was interested to turn up some research that has already been done. I was appalled at what it showed:

- More women die than men as the direct and indirect result of natural disasters.  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/newsAndEvents/archives/2006/WomenAndNaturalDisasters.htm>

- 90% of the 140,000 victims of the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone disasters were women.  
<http://www.wedo.org/files/June%20%20GA%20statement%20climate%20change%207%2031%2007.pdf> ;

- More women than men died during the 2003 European heat wave; and the 2006 tsunami killed 3-4 women for each man.  
<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2005/03/25/tsunami-women050325.html>.

How could that be so?

In a speech in 1999 Lord Hoffman, an English law lord, said “.....unless you know the question, you will not be able to get the right answer. Once the question has been identified, the answer is usually relatively easy...” That prompted me to think that in order to find out why women are more affected by climate change than men, by first asking “in what ways are women more affected?”, we might get some clues as to why women are affected in that way.

Some interesting patterns emerged when further digging revealed that:

- In Sri Lanka, swimming and tree climbing are taught mainly to boys; that helped males cope better than females, and survive, when the waves of the tsunami hit. Social prejudice keeps girls and women from learning to swim, which severely reduces their chances of survival in flooding disasters.
- Women stayed indoors because of social prohibitions against leaving home.

- In Aceh, many women were found dead with babies still clutched in their arms. Some personal accounts by survivors tell of mothers pushing their children to safety on buildings or trees that withstood the tsunami, but being swept away themselves. The long dresses women were obliged to wear under Aceh's shariah laws made it harder for them to move quickly. They could not run as fast as men, nor swim. Some who were in their homes but casually dressed when the first wave struck ran to put on "acceptable" outdoor clothes before seeking safety, and as a result were drowned or barely escaped.

[http://www.wrmea.com/archives/August\\_2005/0508040.html](http://www.wrmea.com/archives/August_2005/0508040.html)

- In times of disaster and environmental stress, women become less mobile because they are the primary care-givers.

- After a natural disaster, women are more likely to become victims of domestic and sexual violence; from fear, they often avoid using shelters

<http://www.feminist.com/news/vaw44.html>

- The household workload increases substantially after a disaster, which forces many girls to drop out of school to help with chores.

- Nutritional status is a critical determinant of the ability to cope with the effect of natural disasters. Women are more prone to nutritional deficiencies because of their unique nutritional needs. Some cultures have household food hierarchies, generally favouring males. In sub-Saharan Africa, women carry greater loads than men, but have a lower intake of calories because the cultural norm is for men to receive more food.

[http://www.genderandenvironment.org/admin/admin\\_biblioteca/documentos/Factsheet%20Adaptation.pdf](http://www.genderandenvironment.org/admin/admin_biblioteca/documentos/Factsheet%20Adaptation.pdf)

- Women plant, produce procure and prepare most of the world's food: women are responsible for approximately 75 percent of household food production in Sub-Saharan Africa; 65 per cent in Asia; and 45 per cent in Latin America. <http://www.madre.org/articles/int/climatechange.html>

- The time-consuming task of gathering and transporting water generally falls to women. As water becomes scarce, women's workload increases dramatically. Girls, school attendances and eventually enrolments drop as they trek longer distances to find water.

From the information I was able to, it seemed to me that the ways in which women are affected more than men were fairly consistently associated with their caregiving obligations or with social or religious mores.

The next problem was, what, if anything, can we do about these appalling statistics? There is probably no real scope for direct action because most of the

foundational problems are entrenched cultural or religious mores that are not really susceptible to even local political intervention. Could aid agencies do what governments can't? Perhaps it all comes down to education, giving women the benefit of the capacity for critical thought that comes with improved general education, and educating women to look objectively at and perhaps think differently about their roles and behaviours when they have adverse consequences, like behaving in a certain way when under threat. That might at least bring them closer to a position of choice.

<http://www.unesco.org/iiep/PDF/Fund73.pdf>

But each possible solution brings more problems and more questions. Where does the money come from? Should it come from the nations that have caused, and those that are still contributing to climate change? How should fair contributions be determined?

In September last year, The Council of Women World Leaders (CWWL), the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) and the Heinrich Boll Foundation North America organised a roundtable called "How a Changing Climate Impacts Women." The participants recognised that while there are no references to gender in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), statistics show that climate change is not gender neutral.

In December 2007, four global institutions – Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) – met with women environment ministers and leaders at the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali to ensure for the first time that *"gender issues are prominent in climate policy and action."*

As a result of the meeting, the Network called upon the signatory countries and the Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to:

- Recognise that women are powerful agents of change and that their full participation is critical in adaptation and mitigation of climate policies and initiatives, and hence, guarantee that women and gender experts participate in all decisions related to climate change;
- Take action in order to ensure UNFCCC compliance with human rights frameworks, international and national commitments on gender equality and equity, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- Develop a gender strategy, invest in gender-specific climate change research and establish a system for the use of gender-sensitive indicators and criteria for governments to use in national reporting to the UNFCCC Secretariat;

- Analyse and identify gender-specific impacts and protection measures related to floods, droughts, heat waves, diseases, and other environmental changes and disasters;
- Given that millions of poor women affected by climate change live and work outside the reach of formal markets, design and implement funding mechanisms accessible to them to reduce their particular vulnerabilities. In addition, increase equitable access by poor women and men to climate change market-based approaches such as the Clean Development Mechanism.

The actions of these groups is a positive and essential step: unless the interaction between gender and climate change is placed and kept firmly on the agenda, any policies to slow and redress climate change and its consequences are unlikely to assist disadvantaged women. Their proposals also allow action to be got in train now, through established international organisations that have the capacity to allocate the necessary funding. And if we all encourage our government to support their initiatives through the United Nations to which all wealthier countries are financial contributors -- then we are all making a contribution to the solution.

Addressing the issue of gender and climate change requires long-term objectives and long-term commitment from the international community. The women's organisations that are currently involved simply cannot shoulder the financial burden, and nor should they. And with the frequency and severity of environmental disasters increasing, it is also critical that the work of those organisations should not be hindered by the qualification "**pending funding.**" <http://www.idealists.org/ifa/en/av/Job/258372-146>

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Kellie Tranter is a lawyer and political commentator. She is Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Legislation for BPW International.