

Effects of climate change on women in Africa

(Wambui Karanja)— What does gender have to do with the environment? Surely climate change does not discriminate between men and women. First of all, 'gender' does not mean exclusively women. If men were the under-represented half of the world's population, agreed, women would stand up for their rights as much as they would stand up for their own.

Second, climate change does discriminate between men and women – as an example, with increasing desertification and the retreat of the glaciers, the threat climate change poses to human existence is enormous. Africa is said to be one of the world's most vulnerable continents to the effects of climate change although it contributes minimally to the problem. The difficult social and economic setting of most Africans, especially women and children, worsens the situation.

Experts have been analysing the vulnerability of different sectors of economies due to climate change. In many parts of Africa, climate change threatens to unravel women's lives putting paid decades of efforts aimed at improving women's lives and livelihoods. Unfortunately, women in rural areas lack knowledge on the imminent dangers posed by climate change. Despite the fact that women living in poverty are the most threatened by the dangers that stem from global warming, they are also key actors in ensuring their communities' ability to cope with and adapt to climate change. In general, women's lives are more intimately connected to the environment more than men. Often, men tend to be away in the cities while the women look after children and work on the land in rural areas.

There is an urgent need to increase women's economic equality, not only to reduce their vulnerability to the effects of global financial crisis but also as part of the effort to support equality in other priority areas including participation in all levels of decision-making and elimination of violence against women. Policy interventions are also needed that require the active and equal participation of women and men, that fully integrate a gender perspective called for the formal recognition of the links between climate change, health and care-giving and gender equality.

Kenya could lose up to three per cent of its \$35 billion gross domestic product (GDP) annually by 2030 due to effects of global warming. Like other countries among the world's poorest continent, Kenya has started to witness signs of climate change including the spread of diseases such as malaria and the movement of wild animals to areas they were not present before. Kenya is just emerging from a prolonged drought that choked growth and cut output of sectors such as agriculture, which accounts for nearly a quarter of its GDP. Climate change impacts cost \$0.5 billion per year now. Although total carbon emissions by the country were low during the year, it warned that they might double by 2030 in line with planned population and economic growth. Poor nations want rich countries to cut emissions by 40 per cent from 1990 levels by 2020 to avert the worst effects of climate change. But many industrialised nations feel such cuts are out of reach, especially in the economic downturn.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Africa's most outspoken leader on global warming, demanded that the West compensate the world's poorest continent for climate change. In Kenya, the agriculture and transport sectors are the country's main sources of emissions. However, full studies on low carbon options and the development of new strategies could mitigate against the effects of global warming. Some Kenyan companies such as electricity producer KenGen and sugar miller Mumias have developed clean development mechanism projects that will soon allow them to sell carbon credits on the international markets. National carrier Kenya Airways has been planting trees in Ngong Hills, near the capital Nairobi, which its

planes fly over every day.

Many women depend on the ecosystem, which is threatened by the scale of climate change. Women in Africa, particularly in the rural areas, are responsible for conducting subsistence farming that is the main source of food. As climate change unfolds, it will result in unpredictable weather patterns and most likely affect the quality of soils with negative consequences for the levels of food production. There is need for policy interventions that address the impact of climate change on women's livelihoods. In particular, it is important to involve women in the design of policies and the implementation of solutions so that there is long-term ownership of potential solutions. Women's vulnerability to climate change needs to be researched so that solutions meets the specific needs on this already marginalised group in society. In addition, policies need to reflect women's lived experiences of climate change so that appropriate interventions can be put in place to reduce the impact of such changes. Educating women about the impacts as well as ways to reduce the impacts of climate change is also a crucial component. Providing extension services to women farmers on appropriate technological innovations, improved storage facilities and resource management services is also key to stemming the impact of climate change on women.

Agriculture is the most vulnerable sector of climate change. An extra two million people in sub-Saharan Africa are going to be affected by water shortages and the majority of these are women. Women make up 70 per cent of smallholder farmers especially in sub-Saharan Africa, but somehow funding targets are often disproportionately directed towards men. Improving women's economic status is a key element in reducing the impact of climate change on women—this is an imperative given the fact that women have direct connection to locally based natural resources. One of the key components of global action on climate change should be measures to adapt to changes that are already unavoidable. Women must find another means of making a living. In contrast to the options open to many men, few women can respond to drought, for example, by relocating to cities or other rural areas in search of work. Women are often tied down by the need to care for children, or social obstacles to mobility; they are also frequently without even the smallest cash savings of their own or assets to sell to bridge hard times.

Women have a lot of knowledge useful for adaptation because they work with the environment through their household duties: include fetching water, gathering firewood and fruits and farming. In Ghana for instance, women constitute about 51 per cent of the population and about 30 per cent of them are heads of households. They constitute 52 per cent of the agricultural labour force, contribute 46 per cent to the total GDP and produce 70 per cent of subsistent crops.

Incidentally, a lot of Ghanaian women depend on their ecosystem to provide food, energy, water and medicine; and it is this ecosystem that is under threat. The impact of climate change will affect a whole host of areas including habitats, wildlife, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. There will also be severe adverse changes in soil, arid lands, coastal zones and tropical forests.

In view of their numbers and contribution to agriculture, women, as in many cases, stand a greater risk in respect of climate-induced disaster. Given the variety of women's daily interactions with the environment, they are the most keenly affected by its degradation. Women's income from their livelihoods and other economic activities will become critical thus making them poorer. This reinforces the importance of the environment and particularly climate change in women's lives.

The relationship between climate and society is dynamic. Variations in climatic conditions may have multiple, simultaneous effects. Their effects on women, men, and their households are

determined by the ways in which they interact with a range of other factors, such as environmental degradation, development, and urbanisation. All these combine in their effect on communities. Most policy makers and practitioners have now started to recognise the different ways in which climate change impacts on the poor, vulnerable, and socially excluded women and men. However, making adaptation policies and programmes sensitive to gender issues does not simply mean 'adding on' a concern for women. It also requires a nuanced understanding of gendered forms of vulnerability, and a stronger commitment of resources – financial, technical, and human – to address specific gendered priorities.

There is the need to recognise the importance of placing women at the heart of sustainable development. It would be a mistake to solve the climate change impacts without integrating women in the process, or improving their status and economic empowerment since women's management of local natural resources is crucial. Thus the education of women on the impacts of climate change on their socio-economic activities as well as the provision of extension services to women farmers on appropriate technological innovations, improved storage facilities and resource management services are recommended. Governments are urged to give women an equal say in how funds given to poor countries to help them adapt to climate change, are managed and spent.

This can be by improving education and healthcare choices for women. Improved access to clean fuels would have profound effects not just on the prosperity and health of individual families, but more broadly on the developing countries they live in. Keeping a lid on population growth, in particular, would also allow developing nations – which make up 80 per cent of the world's overall population – but which consume only 20 per cent of the world's energy resources and contribute 30 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases to have a say in global debates on dealing with the impact of climate change. Women can be more affected by climate change, but they can also be agents of change in their communities and in their families. Women can push to be more organised in their communities around common issues. Therefore, women's participation can ensure that problems are solved more creatively. A step ahead for women can be equivalent to a leap for mankind.

Selling a more women-friendly policy on climate change is hard enough in developed countries of the West, so it will certainly not be easy in developing countries. This has to be done step by step, and it is a long-term process. But optimism is mandatory, or else nothing will change.

- This article is by Wambui E. Karanja, an environmentalist by profession. It was written in her own capacity.

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