Women and Climate Change: An Opportunity to Address Gender Inequality

By Kevin Samy

Two themes have gained increasing attention in the international arena in recent years: the demands of climate change and the rights of women globally. But rarely are connections drawn between the two in drafting so-called solutions to these problems. Issues of gender equality are experienced on a wide spectrum globally, the starkest difference evident between the global north and the global south. Women in developed countries such as Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand have higher literacy rates, increased political voice, and earn higher income per capita than women in developing countries. Similarly, the negative effects of climate change are also felt with varying severity between developed and developing nations. Ironically, the very states, the developed nations in the north, that are largely to blame for contributing to the problem—accounting for the majority of the world’s climate change causing greenhouse gas emissions—tend to be the most resilient to negative climate change impacts. The average American consumes thirty-two times the amount of one Kenyan, but it is Kenya that will feel the harmful effects of a 50 percent decrease in crop yield in the nearer term.

In addition to the more easily perceivable similarities in ways in which the global north and south are affected by gender inequality and climate change, the two problems are also deeply linked at their core. Relatively worse climate change impacts exacerbate gender inequality in the south, which is a fact often overlooked. This is most clearly illustrated by looking at gendered divisions of labor. Gathering water, subsistence farming, and providing energy for the household are primarily female-specific roles in many rural parts of the developing world. Climate uncertainty will make such tasks, which are inextricably dependent on environmental conditions, increasingly difficult. A heightened necessity to address household needs in more creative and time-consuming ways will substantively diminish the opportunity for women to pursue other income-

Kevin Samy is a graduate student in the Master of Environmental Management program at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies focusing on environmental economics and governance. Before graduate school, Mr. Samy worked for the Obama Administration at both the Department of Energy and the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).
generating jobs. Even though this rural household work is heavily natural resource-dependent, women are often barred the right to own land, water, or livestock. Thus their access to technology, inputs, related services, and credit is similarly limited, creating a further problematic situation. In this way, women lack adequate means to improve their food production systems and adapt to climate change. Deficient access to resources makes post-disaster recovery brought on by climate shifts, droughts, or floods equally difficult. Quick post-disaster response may be effective in immediate relief, but if sustainable resiliency is not considered, the result could lead to more intense and frequent environmental problems in the long run.

The systemic issues of environmental degradation and gender inequality are not mutually exclusive. As studies such as the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy’s *Environmental Performance Index* and the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report* indicate, the roots of these problems are often intertwined. The numbers in these reports speak for themselves: the countries that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change tend to be poorer with a wider gender gap. In contrast, countries that rank high in environmental performance and gender equality are among the richest nations of the world. This strong correlation between wealth, climate change resiliency, and gender equality is not a fresh realization; in fact, the idea of including socio-cultural analysis in climate vulnerability models is a practice that has been widely employed. The problem has been follow-up on this realization. With this in mind, the *Gender Gap Report* provides us with insight into what stands to be lost: in countries with problematic gender inequality issues, the institutionalized suppression of intellectual, experiential, and other climate-resilience-building resources that women possess amount to about 50 percent of untapped potential (i.e. half the population). Thus, using the knowledge women have to offer would not only aid in building capacities to handle climate change, but would also indirectly bolster the female role and therefore lessen the gender gap.

Because climate and gender issues become particularly problematic only after causal events such as natural disasters have taken place, solutions tend to evolve with a retrospective focus. The priority of meeting immediate relief demands has become something of a default that dictates the approach of many leaders and policymakers around the globe. This patchwork, although helpful in the short term, will never provide a sustainable resolution. To the extent possible, efforts should always adhere to addressing calamitous situations today while simultaneously trying to prevent them from happening tomorrow. As such, at the 9th United Nations Conference of Parties (COP 9) in May 2008, it was proclaimed that gender issues needed to become part of the evolving climate change agenda. Even with a certain level of international recognition of the issue, there persists a standstill in addressing the gender equality deficiencies that add to climate change vulnerability, and women still lack an entry point to share their knowledge and play a productive role in addressing environmental issues.

Coming full-circle, the social constructions that drive gender gaps in the first place are the same forces denying women their rightful place in the fight against climate change by providing valuable input to help solve environmental vulnerability issues they and their country face. In these developing countries, many initiatives by narrowly-focused
NGOs and issue-specific foreign aid projects are not multifaceted and thus miss a crucial opportunity to tend to over-lapping causal problems. Policymakers should increase efforts to synergize initiatives and tap the dormant resource that women hold. Doing so would undoubtedly better address climate change vulnerability while simultaneously empowering women in the process. In the words of Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations: “Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”