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Review article

Gender differentiated climate change discourse in rural communities in developing countries

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on climate change should provide adequate attention to gender differentiated roles and vulnerability, either at the local community level and international climate change negotiations because the impact of climate change affects women and men differently. There is a missing link to scientific assessment of climate change and responses to climate through a gender dimension and the policies enacted to mitigate and adapt to its impacts. Currently, there is insufficient knowledge regarding gender differentiated impacts of climate change worldwide. However, there has been a consensus that in trying to understand climate change in general, we need to appreciate gender and gender relations. The discussion explores the gender dimension of climate change and the policies enacted to mitigate and adapt to its impacts with the aim of developing gender sensitive approaches with regards to mitigation measures and adaptation strategies in rural communities in developing countries. Women and men in most developing countries are especially vulnerable to climate when they are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood. It is important to remember, however, that both men and women are not only vulnerable to climate change but they are also effective actors or agents of change in relation to both mitigation and adaptation. The relationship between women and the environment revolves around their concerns for providing family food security, fuel, water, and health care. As climate change research knowledge is accumulating at a remarkable pace, it is intersecting with disasters regarding developing nations in fascinating ways.

Yet, there remains a significant gap in integrated quantitative and qualitative methods for studying climate change perception and policy support in rural communities. Men and women extensive theoretical and practical knowledge of the environment and resource conservation should be given due consideration. Their potential contribution to climate mitigation by being part of the intervention strategy should be sufficiently exploited.

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1. Introduction

Rural communities in developing countries will bear a disproportionate burden of the negative effects of climate change due to limited resources and gender differentiated access to climate change knowledge. Climate change is expected to adversely affect food production and natural resources which include water resources and other biodiversity. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of current extreme weather events, lead to greater monsoon and temperature variability, floods, droughts and cyclones, water scarcity, affect agricultural production and see the emergence of a new disaster – the sea level rise (IPCC 2007). The major anticipated impacts of climate change are increase in the frequency and severity which points to the fact that adaptation measures to cope with the impacts of climate change are urgently needed at different levels in different communities. Gender dimension aspects in climate change have long been ignored by the climate discourse despite that the effects of climate change are by no means gender-neutral. The effects of climate change will take a gender dimension or a differentiated impact due to gender disparities in resource allocation, knowledge and decision making. Therefore it is imperative that there is gender-sensitive drive in dealing with climate change issues, considering the differentiated role women and men play in rural societies. Studies have shown that women and men experience climate change differently in terms of their adaptability, responsibility, vulnerability and aptitude for mitigation (Wilson, 2005). The lack of attention to gender issues can be considered as the result of the perceived need felt by negotiators to focus their attention, and the limited available resources, on more universal issues (Wamukonya and Skutsch, 2001). Therefore, the international climate change negotiation process – as well as climate policies at regional, national and local levels - must adopt the principles of gender equity at all stages: from research, to analysis, and the design and implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies (LIFE e.V., WECF , 2006). It is by now widely acknowledged that the impacts of climate change will be felt more acutely by those with least adaptive capacity: poor countries and the poor in developing countries (Klima, 2003). This implies that the vulnerability or susceptibility of a population group to the effects of climate change depends on the resilience of the surrounding natural landscape unit and society's capacity to adapt (Johansson and Karlsson, 2000).

2. Gender differentiated impact and vulnerability to climate change

Climate change is altering the face of disaster risk, not only through increased weather-related risks and sea-level and temperature rise, but also through increases in societal vulnerabilities from stresses on water availability, agriculture and ecosystems. Rural households will bear a disproportionate burden of the negative effects of climate change due to reliance heavily on climate-sensitive resources such as local water supplies and agricultural land; climate-sensitive activities such as arable farming and livestock husbandry; and natural resources such as fuelwood and wild herbs (Shackelton and Shackelton, 2004). However, the existing gender inequalities and social norms are major factors which will play into existing patterns of climate change vulnerability within rural communities in developing countries, and are likely to make patterns of inequality more conspicuous. Recognition of men and women's crucial role as major complimenting agents in biodiversity management is a key starting point for engendering climate change adaptation. This can be facilitated by removal of obstacles which continue to limit a specific gender to resources and climate change information. Both men and women should be given an equal opportunity in climate change decision making, access to information on weather patterns and adaptive capacity

should not be limited by traditional gender roles. These limitations are exacerbated by the disproportionate effects of climate change on specific gender. The anticipated climate change impacts pose serious threats to sustainable community resource management. Thus, developing an effective gender strategy for biodiversity management is essential not only for the promotion of gender equality, but also for economic growth and rural development. Climate-related shocks and stresses are adding pressure to the already precarious livelihoods of marginalised rural communities experiencing poverty and a range of other constraints in developing world, and will increasingly do so with accelerating climate change effects. In most rural communities, men and women have different access to resources, including physical resources like land, social resources like networks, and financial resources like income-generating work and credit. A general discussion on agriculture and other activities suggests that in many poor societies and poor strata of society, women have a high share of agricultural activities but only little decision-making power or control over inputs and outputs. This implies that they exist a gender differentiated options and ability to cope with climate change effects. The adaptation intervention strategies should highlight the gender dimension through emphasis on visible gender differences: different roles, different involvements, different experiences, different opinions, and different needs. The gender dimension in climate change comprises primarily two aspects: women, particularly in developing countries, are more vulnerable than men to the consequences of climate change (higher vulnerability); second, men and women play different roles in dealing with climate change, whereby women are major actors in several areas of mitigation and adaptation (agents of change) (Rodenberg, 2009). However, an attempt should be made not to prejudices about the capacities of men or women, or about which activities are better suited to one or another. It should be noted that men and women have a complementary role in dealing with climate change issues. Traditional configuration of gender roles means that women and men have multiple responsibilities in the home, at the workplace and in the community. These many demands leave women with less time for political involvement and without the possibility of actively participating in the decision-making processes that impact their lives, environment and aspirations (Fordham, 2001). Although it is known that climate change events have a gender differentiated impact on rural communities, the impact of climate change on gender dimension is rarely or not yet been quantified, nor has the effect on the vulnerable groups in different socio-economic strata ascertained. Unequal power relations and access to livelihood assets mean that men and women have different capacities to mitigate or adapt to climate change. Rural women are poorly informed about mitigation and adaptation strategies because policy, program design and information systems are still primarily directed at men.

3. Gender insensitive climate change policies compromise adaptive capacity of rural communities

Historically, socially and economically there are gender differentiated roles in underdeveloped and marginalized societies. The gender inequality in decision and policy making and development process has undermined the capacity to deal with climate change issues. This implies that climate change would have serious gender dimensions implications for coping with climate change disasters due to different responsibilities and less access to resources. Without gender equality in secure access to and control over natural resources (land, water, livestock, trees), will result in gender differentiated response to climate change challenges, where vulnerable groups due to lack of resources are less likely to be able to cope with climate change impacts. It is undisputable that climate change variability constitutes a major threat on a new scale for humanity, particularly for the populations of impoverished developing countries with lower incomes. There has been relatively restricted in-depth analysis of the gender dimensions of climate change to date, partly because of the uncertainties of climate change science and the lack of downscaled data which makes it hard to predict how the climate will change at rural community level, and because social change processes are difficult to predict. Participation in decision making and access to information is not always equal for men and women and this may affect their participation and the representation of their ideas in short- and long-term decision making on climate change. Analysis of the impoverished rural communities in developing countries that are most vulnerable to calamities associated with climate extremes will allow for better-informed strategic mobilization of international development resources and climate policy instruments. Gender sensitive policies in climate change are not meant to favour women or on gender relationships; these are policies which take into account gender as a significant variable in climate change mitigation and adaptation drive. In society men and women have different roles, which impact differently on their environment. Moreover, the differentiated roles and power relations between men and women can greatly influence the perspective of men and women on climate change adaptive capacity and vulnerability. Therefore, it

is critical that gender sensitive climate change policies should pay attention to the similarities and the differences between men and women's skills, experiences, knowledge and viewpoints, and gives equal value to these in terms of dealing with climate change issues. Taking into account gender-sensitive dimension that highlights men's and women's perspectives, contributions, and needs can influence policymakers and contribute to gender sensitive policies that address both men's and women's needs and, thus, leads to more efficient and effective climate change adaptation policies. Such policies need not be climate-specific but gender sensitive at the same time serving to enhance rural families' livelihood options, making them more resilient if their resource-base changes. In this way, development efforts and programs to reduce poverty will lessen livelihood vulnerability, ultimately reducing the need for families to migrate because of climate change (Shackelton and Shackelton, 2004).

4. Gender component as a missing link in tackling climate change issues

There is mounting evidence of shifts in the climate and consequent effects on ecological processes and biodiversity. There has been a consensus on environmental change having an immediate and direct effects on food production, health and well-being of majority of households that depend on natural resources for their basic livelihoods, especially in rural areas (Koziell and Saunders, 2004). Furthermore, an agreement among climate change scientists, policy makers and development agencies that gender dynamics influence climate change adaptation interventions, but because policies, programmes and projects are being devised and are beginning to be implemented there are lessons to be learned about improving gender equality and promoting women's empowerment in this regard. Using an appropriate model of gender -climate analysis framework, is critical to assess the gender differentiated impacts of climate volatility for rural communities in developing countries. With the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events predicted to change in the future, informed policy design and analysis requires an understanding of which groups within rural communities are going to be most vulnerable to increasing effects of climate change. In climate change, social roles, discrimination and lack of resources should not exacerbate gender differentiated experiences of social exclusion and disempowerment which result in more vulnerability to climate change effects. Lack of resources and climate change knowledge increase reduce time to participate in decision making, conservation and income-generating activities, often compromising adaptive capabilities. Gender responsive approach present an opportunity and the responsibility to bring both men and womens' voices to the fore of climate change solutions in national decision-making and community-level mitigation and adaptation strategies. Differentiated gender roles and knowledge should be taken advantage of in the quest to give appropriate solutions to climate change issues. This implies that the ability to get things done by both men and women becomes a valuable resource.

5. Implications

Exclusion of a gender-sensitive approach in tackling the climate change variability issue will make it impossible to determine the full set of causes and potential effects of climate change on rural communities in developing countries. The foundational goal of adaptation strategies is the reduction of the vulnerabilities to climate-induced change in order to protect and enhance the livelihoods of resource poor people in developing countries. This is strictly correlated to the concept of adaptive capacity and as a result the greater and more varied the resource base and knowledge on climate change the higher and more prepared and adaptive capacity the local communities may possess in dealing with climate change effects. Incorporating a gendered perspective which acknowledge that men and women face different situations, have different capabilities and require different needs to be fulfilled their mandate in climate change mitigation and adaptation becomes central to dealing with climate change induced disasters. Thus, they have different responsibilities in tackling the climate change issues. In this regard gender sensitive policies should spearhead the drive to ensure that weather and climate services embrace the special needs and strengths of both men and women to reduce their vulnerability to disasters and climate change and realize their potential as champions of community resilience. Nondiscriminatory gendered access to climate change information will often make communities less exposed to the risks of extreme weather and other climate change related effects. This implies that engendered climate change mitigation and adaptation presents a common cause of concern through reducing the vulnerability of rural communities and achieving sustainable development in developing countries.

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