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Women in international development

Ruth Smith | 13th May 2019



We need to frame policy that addresses the complex drivers of gendered vulnerabilities to climate change.

Women are often portrayed as suffering 'victims' inherently vulnerable to changing climatic conditions, or as the unrecognised 'saviours' of the planet upon whose shoulders lies the burden of responsibility in avoiding climate breakdown.

A reductive portrayal of women as either being more dependent on the natural world (and so more vulnerable to its changing conditions) or as having a better understanding of environmental protection is deeply problematic.

It is much easier to design policy that relates to simplified narratives of women as impacted victims, acutely affected by environmental destruction and as agents of positive environmental action than it is to frame policy that addresses the complex drivers of gendered vulnerabilities.

One-size-fits-all

Reductive narratives homogenise women across the planet into a single group with static roles. This overlooks the potential differences in vulnerability and environmental agency of women of different classes, castes, ethnicities, ecological zones and so on.

This homogenisation and simplification often results in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in development policy and programming that rarely matches the needs of the intended beneficiaries.

The potential vulnerability and agency of men is drastically overlooked. Take for example the soaring temperatures up to 50 degrees C and persistent droughts across much of India that are forcing (mostly) male farmers into wage labour and leading to a spike in [male farmer suicides](#).

Narratives that depict only women as inherently vulnerable to climate change overlook such instances where male groups face specific and acute vulnerability to changing climatic conditions.

These criticisms can be traced back to the failed development policies of previous environment and development movements of the 1970-1990s. Such parallels demonstrate that feminists have consistently faced pressures to simplify, sloganise and create narratives in order to find space for their agenda within development discourse.

Women in Development

In the 'Women in Development' (WID) movements of the early 1970s, development organisations lobbied for women-centred policies in order to bring women into the development agenda. An important influence behind this was [Ester Boserup](#)'s work on the role of Women in Economic Development (1970).

Combined with the feminist fight for equal pay, working conditions and citizenship for women in the US, the WID movement gained momentum throughout the 1970s through the narrative that the gendered division of labour results in women's disadvantages in society.

This argument intertwined with environment and development discourse in the 1980s-90s and lay the groundwork for the Women, Environment and Development (WED) movement.

Scholars such as [Vandana Shiva](#) argued that the gendered division of labour (particularly in reproductive and subsistence-focused activities) meant women have a higher knowledge of and dependence on the natural world as a source of food, fuel and sustenance for themselves and their families.

Shiva developed this ideological relationship through demonstrating that the destruction of nature therefore equates to the destruction of women's resources and the material oppression of women.

Natural protectors

As a result, the image of the 'vulnerable' rural/indigenous woman having to travel ever further in her search for food, fuelwood and water for her family became popular within international development organisations in order to promote their women-centred programs and policies.

This narrative was developed in the 1980s when women were portrayed as the natural protectors of the environment through demonstrating their intrinsic relationship with nature and special understanding of environmental protection.

Shiva drew on the resistance of indigenous women in particular in the Indian Chipko movement, which prevented widespread logging destruction by hugging trees, in order to demonstrate women's unrecognised position as caretakers of the environment.

By the end of the 1980s, the positive image of women as efficient natural resource managers and protectors overtook that of the victim image.

This narrative gained traction and resulted in the interpretation that women should be exclusively targeted through policy and projects as they represented an untapped resource for development.

Inertia

Critiques of the women-centred approach within development organisations soon followed. Adding environmental chores to women's already long list of household and caring roles was seen to increase their workload with little reward nor provided them with the inputs (education, information, and land rights) that they required.

This essentialist link between women and nature stems from a generalised perception of women's roles as static and more closely linked to the environment and natural resource management than men's. A conflation of all women into one homogenous group resulted in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in development policy and programming that rarely met the needs of different women groups.

An almost exclusive focus on the role of women in society drastically overlooked the role of men in caring for the environment.

These critiques resulted in inertia in the WID and WED movements in the early millennium. The narrative of women as having a special relationship with the environment began to ebb and no longer permeated environment and development policy discussions at the time.

Poverty and global climate change began to take precedence within development discourse and were seen to require an international response that focused predominantly on technologically-driven mitigation approaches within policy, and which, for a while at least, overlooked any possible connections with women or gendered inequalities.

Untapped agency

The recognition that climate change will adversely affect the world's poor and exacerbate existing inequalities provided space for the women's movement to again strategically position themselves and revive their rhetoric in order to drive policy and programming.

In the early millennium rural women in the developing world were consistently portrayed as one dimensional objects that were inherently vulnerable to climate change and rarely entered into discussions as anything else – leading to the narrative that they required the assistance of the international development agencies of the North.

The homogenisation of women and their depiction as victims and/or saviours of the natural world is now once again prominent within policy arenas and international development organisations through the portrayal of women as having an increased vulnerability to climate change and a simultaneous untapped agency in the fight against it.

Arora-Jonsson (2011) outlines three main arguments within the growing body of literature of women and climate change as to why women require special attention: 1. women are proposed to make up 70 percent of the world's poor; 2. women have a higher mortality rate in climate-induced disasters (some **papers** claim women are 14 times more likely to die in such events than men); and 3. women are portrayed as being more environmentally conscious.

This narrative therefore builds on the inertia associated with the WED movement since the 1990s through yet again welcoming notions of vulnerability, feminine agency and care for the environment.

Complex relations

Such stark statistics are used by many international organisations and NGOs in order to access resources and to support their women-centred projects. However, such figures are **heavily disputed** with no scientific studies ever cited to back them up.

This provides a simplistic and even misleading basis for the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs.

Taking for granted assumptions of women's vulnerability overlooks the complexity of gendered power relations and reduces gender to the biological differences between men and women – with women alone seen as being consistently disadvantaged.

Such notions again silence any contextual differences in vulnerability between women of different social groups and ecological settings – and again drastically overlook the potential vulnerability of certain male groups.

Vulnerability to climate change is not defined by gender alone as it crosses boundaries of race, class, ethnicity and numerous other demographics.

Development projects should avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in programme design with one homogenised solution, and instead focus on the drivers of vulnerability rather than targeting the inherent vulnerability of women as a homogenous group. Such a shift would therefore allow for a deeper and more nuanced consideration of women (and men) in different contexts.

This Author

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Image: [Climate Visuals](#).