

MSc. Sustainable Development KU Leuven

Why Climate Displacements Are Not Gender Neutral



Image source: <http://thecommonwealth.org>

By Titus Kipruto

When you think about climate change, what comes to your mind? Global warming, sea level rise, storms, hurricanes, adaptation, and mitigation are all terms often used in climate change discussions but gender isn't that common and yet it is one of the oldest, inescapable forms of inequalities in the world. Most gender debates are prominent in discussions on inequalities in access to resources and poverty but are yet to feature persuasively in climate-related discussions. According to the UNFCCC's gender action team¹, climate change affects everyone but unfortunately, not equally. Climate change aggravates existing inequalities in society because when women are poorly placed to access education and decent employment, they are less likely to get the knowledge, information, and support that could help them deal with climate change impacts. Women and are also the most affected when they have to move as a result of climate-related disasters.



Image source: <http://thecommonwealth.org>



Image source: <http://campaigncc.org>



In a northern Viet Nam province, a farmer and her daughter walk through a field carrying a heavy load of dried corn crop leaves. Climate change is bringing new hardships with women and children bearing the negative impacts of fuel and water collection and transport. Women in many developing countries spend from one to four hours a day collecting biomass for fuel. Source: unwomen.org

This product portfolio is developed as an article for "The Voice"- An international student magazine of LOKO international, the student council body of KU Leuven University. The learning activity attended for the development of this article was a conference event dubbed "*Climate Displacement in a gender perspective: The need for action at UN level*"². The activity was held at the European Parliament on the 17th of October 2018 and the activity lasted for 3.5 hours (15h- 18.30h). The objective of this conference was to highlight the relationship between climate-induced displacements and human rights, especially women rights including how this should be addressed in the development agenda.

The discussions at the conference were guided by the following questions:

- ❖ What are the current experiences and main difficulties of climate refugees from a gender perspective?
- ❖ How is the UN system currently addressing climate displacement, which instruments, and bodies should be in the lead? What is the state of play regarding the Paris agreement's task force on displacement (COP 24) and the global compact for migration (UN conference in Morocco, December 2018)?
- ❖ How can and what is the EU doing to contribute to and push the development of a global agenda on climate displacement, which also is gender responsive?



Images source: <http://unhcr.org>; <http://unhcr.org>

Climate induced displacements

The international organization for migration estimates that 26 million people³ are displaced every year due to climate-related events such as floods, hurricanes or climate variability. By 2050, climate-induced displacements will rise to between 25 million to 1 billion people⁴, with 200 million being the most probable estimate. Climate change is therefore an important player in destabilizing livelihoods and communities especially in developing countries who have limited resources to adapt to these natural disasters.

However, migration is not driven by only one factor. Other social, economic and political factors are also responsible for the insecurity of livelihoods in affected areas. Climate migrants might not even be aware that their displacements are as a result of climate change. They might think it's just because of poverty, loss of livelihoods and food insecurity or simply they could not make a living. This observation emphasizes the importance of enhancing the resilience of livelihoods when addressing climate change



Image source: <http://fi.undp.org>



Image source: <http://unhcr.org>



Two girls from Tacoban stand in front of some of the damage and debris left by the storm Haiyan in Philippines (December 2013). Source: unfccc.int

Gender Perspective

Since climate change is causing displacements both internally and across borders, it is expected that climate finance will increase to developing countries for adaptation and mitigation strategies. However, if women are not included in the planning and development of such projects, they might not benefit due to existing inequalities in society. This leads us to perhaps one of the most significant elements of climate-related displacements; its gender perspective. According to the committee for the elimination of discrimination against women, women migrating in the context of climate change face a whole range of human rights abuses. In the event of climate-related disasters, women and girls and children are usually the most vulnerable and fall victims of violence, exploitation, and human trafficking. When disasters occur, men tend to migrate first, leaving women behind with the children and the elderly. This means more responsibilities for women who already bear the consequences of existing inequalities in society. Women are also often left with farming responsibilities in climate change affected areas while at the same time lacking the legal and socially recognized land ownership to enable them to adapt. This makes their lives more challenging and perpetuates the poverty cycle more. According to the UN women and world bank⁵, more women than men live in poverty and these women also happen to live in areas at risk of natural disasters such as droughts, storms, and sea level rise. The implications of these observations are illustrated below by two examples of gender disparities related to poverty and climate change in developing countries.



Image source: <http://voxeurop.eu>



Image source: <http://brookings.edu>

Some concrete insights from developing countries

Bangladesh is a large delta country seriously affected by climate change⁶ due to its geographical location, high population, illiteracy, and poverty. Being one of the poorest countries in Asia, it does not have the capacity to cope, therefore it has a high vulnerability and high levels of displacement. But the gender perspective of climate change displacements in this country is obvious and worrying. During the Bangladesh cyclone in 1991, 90% of the 140000 fatalities were women⁷. When disasters such as floods and storms occur in Bangladesh, women are forced to move from the countryside, finding themselves in cities where they are exposed to more vulnerabilities and exploitations due to their poor economic status.

Johannes English in his documentary (*One Every Second*)⁸ illustrates that every year, more than twenty million people – an average of one person every second – are displaced because of climate-related disasters. Dhaka city in Bangladesh receives a large proportion of migrants coming from rural areas and low-lying coastal areas due to climate reasons. Most of these migrants end up in slums where they are exposed to hunger, harassment, and exploitation because they don't have any protection or support networks. Already existing inequalities in the societies make women and girls more vulnerable and more dependent on other people. Women are forced to work in poor conditions because they must provide for children and their families. Others are forced into commercial sex work where they are further exploited, harassed and oppressed.

Another example more related to livelihoods is from West Africa where fishing and farming are the most important means of existence for the people. But due to climate change and illegal fishing by European vessels⁹, these activities are no longer productive as before. Water currents are changing due to temperature changes in the sea, planktons are reducing and gradually the fish is becoming less. The sea level is rising to levels not witnessed before. The countryside is also changing becoming drier and with less rain. This situation forces people to move to Europe as illegal migrants where they get exploited and abused as undocumented migrants.



Image source: <http://womendeliver.org>



Image source: un.org



Image source: <http://campaigncc.org>

What next?

It is now clear that climate change together with its consequences is not new. What is new is how to tackle the problem. The lack of consensus on terminologies and definitions of climate refugees and debates over the figures and numbers of people displaced due to climate change highlights the limited knowledge we have and the need to step up investment in research about the topic. The following are some suggestions that can help to deal with climate-induced displacements and its impacts on women, as a way forward.

Way forward....

First and foremost, climate migrants need to be recognized in the policy arenas and perhaps a legal status for climate refugees in the Geneva convention on refugees. Second, various international institutions, action and decision-making centers like the UNFCCC, UNHCR, the UN, and the EU need to step up their game because they are well placed to address these issues. These institutions can invest in research and fund knowledge acquisition on climate-induced migration including consensus on the extent of these migrations, on definitions and methodologies. This is because we cannot tackle the problem unless we understand it.

Also, these institutions can allocate financial support to strengthen livelihoods at the affected areas through for example investing in irrigation projects or supporting women empowerment projects and promoting access to markets. They can also provide spaces for women to share their understanding and traditional knowledge with people in powerful positions. This can be achieved by developing grassroots women capacity to articulate their expertise to decision makers. The gender perspective of the debate also implies the need for championing for policies to enable women representation in climate-related discussions. There is a need for more women in decision making spheres, more women scientists and more women experts in climate-related disciplines.



Image source: <http://cofeeandclimate.org>

The EU also needs to restrict its member countries from going on fishing expeditions to Africa where they increase vulnerabilities of African societies by overfishing and destroying the environment. Their large commercial fishing vessels are responsible for causing accidents, oil spills and destabilization of the fishing sector, a big employer in many coastal communities in Africa. The EU on its part again can contribute to the safety and security of climate refugees if it can implement the global pact for safe, orderly and regular migration which is people-centered and gender responsive. Finally, the gender perspective needs to be considered in the solutions being proposed at the EU an UN level just to make sure that help is being directed to those who need it most. This is because women empowerment is very important in achieving sustainable development as recognized by the 1992 Rio conference on environment and development¹⁰.

Even so, gender inequalities continue to be a key driver of poverty. Gender currently is not being given the attention it deserves in the policy and recommended solutions even at the UNFCCC. Women, for example, do not have access to land rights in most African countries and proposing agricultural resilience without considering the gender perspective of that might even exacerbate inequalities. There is a need therefore to scale up support for adaptation programs and disaster risk management initiatives in developing countries with a gender focus. Last but not least, we should all drum up support and global action to tackle the underlying root causes of displacement which are poverty, marginalization and climate change.



Image source: <http://dw.com>



Image source: <http://iied.org>

Endnotes

¹ UNFCCC (2016, March 8). Why climate change is not gender neutral. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/news/climate-action-needs-gender-action>

² EFA EU. Event (2018, October 17). Climate displacement in a gender perspective. Retrieved from <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/event/climate-displacement-in-a-gender-perspective/>

³ IOM, UN migration (2018, November 16). IOM launches Holding on 'Campaign': A virtual reality experience of internal displacement. Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-launches-holding-campaign-virtual-reality-experience-internal-displacement>

⁴ IOM, UN migration: Migration and climate change. Retrieved March 3, 2019 from <https://www.iom.int/migration-and-climate-change-0>

⁵ UN Women (2017, November 9). UN Women and the World Bank unveil new data analysis on women and poverty. Retrieved from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/11/news-un-women-and-the-world-bank-unveil-new-data-analysis-on-women-and-poverty>

⁶ Denissen AK., (2012, April 4). Climate change and its impacts on Bangladesh. Retrieved from <http://www.ncdo.nl/artikel/climate-change-its-impacts-bangladesh>

⁷ Ikeda, K. (1995). Gender differences in human loss and vulnerability in natural disasters: a case study from Bangladesh. *Bulletin (Centre for Women's Development Studies)*, 2(2), 171-193.

⁸ Englich, J. (Producer) *One Every Second* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFizi7UTIPo&t=1s>

⁹ SIF, (2010, September 20). Africa: Stealing fish and lives says Beatrice Gorez in an interview. Retrieved from <https://stopillegalfishing.com/press-links/africa-stealing-fish-and-lives-says-beatrice-gorez-coordinator-cffa-in-an-interview/>

¹⁰ Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, in Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UN Doc. A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I), 12 August 1992, Annex I.