

Climate change and women: Mainstreaming gender perspectives into climate change strategies

The floods in KwaZulu-Natal earlier this year caused untold devastation as more than 430 people lost their lives, many are still missing and, before any real repair could be done, further floods hit the area again. This natural disaster highlighted the socioeconomic and climate change vulnerabilities of our country, and of women, says Bongiwe Ndondo, executive director of Hlanganisa Community Fund for Social and Gender Justice.



Source: Supplied

Ndondo says that as the tough work really begins and people start rebuilding their lives, it is important to reflect on how this emergency humanitarian crisis discriminates against and impacts women most.

“Women are much more vulnerable when it comes to humanitarian or environmental disasters. In terms of poverty, and the burden of care, climate change impacts the poor the most, of which women make a larger proportion than men,” says Ndondo.

More women fall below the poverty line

According to South Africa's Living Conditions Survey (LCS), 52.2% of women fall below the upper-bound poverty line (UBPL) or national poverty line, compared to 46.1% of men. Furthermore, research shows that 74.8% of women-led households fall below this line, whereas only 59.3% of men-led households do. The South African government measures the upper-bound poverty line (UBPL) as an income of R 1,183 per month.

“With certain geographic areas being more vulnerable due to location as well as climate change, women seem to bear the brunt of not being able to relocate easily. Child and extended-family care responsibilities often mean that they are the last to be moved,” says Ndondo.

“Inequalities, such as poor housing and land ownership and financing, increase women’s vulnerability. Furthermore, the increase in water-borne diseases caused by flooding becomes a women’s burden, with the added responsibility of having to care for ill family,” she says.



Global warming made KZN floods twice as likely - study

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Women excluded from environmental management discourse

Climate change impacts food security, portable water supply and energy for heating and cooking, and severely impacts women who are more dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Because of the socioeconomic status of women, they are often excluded from environmental management discourse, limiting their decision-making power.

Worse yet, in situations of displacement, women’s vulnerability to sexual gender-based violence increases, including rape, trafficking and early or forced marriages.

This situation is mirrored in many countries globally, with the United Nations stating 10 years ago already that climate change, as one of the greatest global challenges of the twenty-first century, impacts gender differently.

An article written in 2012 by Balgis Osman-Elasha, principal investigator with the Climate Change Unit in Sudan stated that, “Women are increasingly being seen as more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change, mainly because they represent the majority of the world’s poor and are proportionally more dependent on threatened natural resources.”



Source: Supplied

Building resilience

Ndondo says that the gender inequality gaps relating to access to resources such as housing, land and credit needs to be addressed, including information and technology which is crucial in disaster management and mitigation.

“As a country, and a continent, we need to strengthen women’s organisations to build resilience, to focus on mitigation and disaster management and control,” Ndondo says.

Founded in 2006 as Hivos South Africa, Hlanganisa facilitates grants and funding to provide opportunities to uplift many South Africans who continue to experience discrimination and poor access to their socio-economic rights. Improving the lives of society’s most vulnerable and capacity building are some of the pillars of this South African civil society organisation, with climate and gender justice, resilience and women’s leadership at their core focus.

Facilitating political participation

Real change is needed when it comes to facilitating political participation of women in climate change discourse. “This speaks to acknowledging that women are repositories of indigenous knowledge systems that can help preserve the environment, improve food security, improve adaptations around water harvesting, storage, food preservation, agricultural practices and strengthen local food supply chains,” she says.

Ndondo notes that changes needed on the ground include the collection and utilisation of sex disaggregated data and improved disaster preparedness on the part of local governments.

“Socio-environmental issues impact women differentially; now is the time to be intentional in mitigating the looming crises,” she says.

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