

Women's Rights and Climate Change

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Climate change is a matter of international human rights

Erratic rainfalls, more heat, drought, floods – all these effects of climate change are taking lives and making the livelihoods of millions of women, men, boys and girls living in poverty increasingly untenable. Wherever you go on this planet and you start to speak to rural women, they all say that the weather has changed, nothing can be predicted. Life that was already so hard is becoming impossible. Here in Canada we often talk about saving the planet for future generations. Unfortunately, the crisis is being felt strongly by individuals in poor communities as we speak. It is not just about the environment. It is about peoples' lives right now – their human rights to live a life with dignity.

That means that we need to stop climate change in its tracks if we want to advance human rights and end global poverty.

Women living in poverty are the least responsible but are bearing the biggest burden for climate change right now

Climate change is a fundamental women's rights issue. While I am no means a climate change expert, the facts clearly demonstrate that climate change does discriminate. Here are some examples:

1. Over the past two decades, the number of weather-related disasters has quadrupled. Women are more likely to die during natural disasters than men. A study by the London School of Economics of 141 disasters showed decisively that a higher death rate for women is directly linked to their lack of rights (when, for example, women can't leave their homes without a male escort).
2. Climate change is deepening the food crisis for women and their families. Women are the majority of the world's small-scale farmers and produce most of the world's food. But climate change has made the risky business of farming all the more difficult. More frequent crop failures mean women work harder and families eat less.
3. Climate change leads to increased illness and disease and women are the primary caregivers for the sick. Climate change has increased both floods and droughts, contributing to outbreaks of diarrhea and cholera. It has increased the spread of malaria and dengue-carrying mosquitoes. Water-related diseases alone kill over two million people every year, most of them women and children.
4. Indigenous women bear a triple burden despite decades demanding international action on the environment. Drought, flooding, erratic temperatures and extinction of plants and animals weaken not just the planet but also indigenous women's identity, well-being and way of life.
5. Climate change makes women's long workday even longer. When unpredictable rainfall makes food, fuel and water scarce, women have to walk longer and farther to collect them-time that could have been spent studying, earning an income or working

to better their communities. What's more, long remote treks often put women at a greater risk of violence.

6. Global warming increases the likelihood of armed conflict, including violence against women. The increasing scarcity of resources has already led to wars being fought over access to water and arable land. And with war, too often there is a surge in violence against women.

Climate change mitigation

The consensus of the world's climate scientists is that the average global temperature must not rise more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels if we are to avoid catastrophic and irreversible changes, with disastrous consequences for the world's most vulnerable people. Scientists agree the volume of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, which cause global warming, must peak by 2015 and fall dramatically to somewhere between 25% and 40% below 1990 levels by 2020.

Canada is the second largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world, per capita, and the eight largest in terms of absolute volume. The Canadian government must hear loudly from its citizens to be a leader in these negotiations and work with world leaders to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Back in December 2007, the world's countries launched make-or-break negotiations to stop global warming and avoid catastrophic changes to the climate. Governments have now agreed to forge a final deal by December 2009 at their meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark. Never before has a global UN meeting had such a significance for our planetary survival.

Adaptation for poor women

Part of the solution is funding to enable communities living in poverty to adapt to the changing environment and prepare for disasters. Millions of dollars are needed for this adaptation. So is it even possible to finance adaptation funds in the current financial crisis?

"The Right To Survive", a 2009 report by Oxfam International, notes that the world spent more on video games than it did on international humanitarian assistance in 2006. At the first round of climate change talks in Bonn, Germany, a delegate from the Philippines noted that the Christmas bonus of a Wall Street banker was higher than the amount of money allocated to the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF). The money is there, it is just not being prioritized to climate change.

And what would poor communities do with this money? In the global south, citizens are looking for ways to build up their resilience, ways to adapt to climate change. This might include upgrading national flood early-warning systems, planting mangrove 'bio-shields' along coasts to diffuse storm waves, and finding innovative ways in which to store food and grain to guard against severe weather. If countries fail to adapt to the new reality of climate change, they will suffer far greater damage from floods, droughts and hurricanes, and at a much higher cost, both in human and financial terms.

Oxfam Canada is asking the Canadian government to ensure that women are also empowered in terms of adaptation. Adaptation funds must be prioritized to help women living in poverty

adapt to the impacts of climate change. The distance women are walking for water is growing. Women are looking for renewable energy sources, cooking fuels and re-forestation initiatives.

Women's leadership for climate justice

The majority of women in the developing world live and work close to nature daily. They see what is happening in front of their very eyes and they are already coming up with innovative ways in which to adapt to our changing climate. The fact is that most of these women are nowhere near the decision-making tables.

Women leaders, especially indigenous women, have substantive analysis to provide to climate action with regards to adaptation and mitigation of the impact. We need to bring women with knowledge to all of our actions for climate justice, from the local to global level.

"Never waste a crisis"

The world is facing multiple crises – climate, financial, food, fuel – that are affecting people's lives around the world and right here at home. While doom scenarios are a real possibility we have a choice as to how to respond. Freeze from fear? Protect our assets and save? Take care of ourselves?

Or...use the crisis as an opportunity to name systemic problems –an economy built upon non-renewable resources; and the exploitation of women's labour. There are sustainable, green, pro-poor and equitable alternatives to current models of economic development. Never before has the rationale for fundamental change been so obvious. A crisis of this proportion comes along only once in a generation. Let's make sure we make enough noise, and make the solutions as accessible to as many decision-makers as possible, to bring about the great turning.

SIX things we need to do individually and collectively:

- Make climate change a matter of international human rights
- Inform each other about how women living in poverty are the least responsible but are bearing the biggest burden for climate change right now
- Undertake local to global organizing: Help get a fair deal in Copenhagen this December.
- Sign Oxfam Canada's petition at: http://act.oxfam.ca/act/stopfarm_09/petition.php and get others to do the same!
- Advocate for funding for adaptation for poor women
- Build and create women's leadership for climate justice
- Make enough noise, and make the solutions as accessible to as many decision-makers as possible