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## Common Ground

### In Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, Senegal and Trinidad and Tobago

Climate change affects women in different ways across the globe, but common themes bridge their experiences. Examining the impact of climate change through a gender lens in five developing countries—Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, Senegal and Trinidad and Tobago—reveals a pattern. In each of these countries, women represent a large percentage of the poor, experience gender inequality and are faced with increasing vulnerabilities as the climate changes.

In 2008, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) commissioned five partners to conduct case studies in their home countries, exploring the linkages between gender and climate change.<sup>A</sup> Countries were selected based on regional diversity, vulnerability to climate change, least developed and developing country status and WEDO's strong existing partnerships.

Taken together, the following snapshots offer a composite of the gender issues associated with climate change and suggest important policy points and opportunities for intervention. For example, although women play a vital

role in household and community natural disaster recovery, policies that address the impact of disasters and recovery efforts often favour the livelihoods of men. In many cases, the false policy assumption remains that this will also benefit women,<sup>1</sup> whereas women's own livelihoods must also be secured.

As national governments draft and implement policies to respond to their populations' needs, it is important that they recognize the different roles played by women and men in coping with, managing, off-setting and building resilience to climate change impacts.

<sup>A</sup> These case studies were made possible with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Government of Greece. The full studies can be accessed at [www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org).

# Bangladesh

*“During these tense moments [of disaster], women...head towards shelter with their children in one hand and household goods in the other, all of which becomes difficult to manage and, in many cases, becomes the cause of their deaths. Many children cannot run because they refuse to get down from their mother’s arms, as a result of which the mothers cannot run either. That’s why women and children suffer more.”*

—Marium, 60 years old,  
Char Kukri Mukri, Bangladesh<sup>2</sup>

Climate change and natural disaster in Bangladesh hit women disproportionately hard. Though women’s participation is widely supported in numerous public arenas, from politics to community organizations, they remain under-represented in the national economy and overburdened in the home. When disaster strikes, their responsibilities increase as they must work harder to complete their daily tasks. Social norms and expectations often limit their ability to react. Fewer economic opportunities, in informal and formal markets, add to the household burden when access to markets and room to negotiate prices for sellable goods decreases.

## **FOCUS ON** Health and Physical Safety

—Women in Bangladesh still face various types of violence in their lives—and levels of physical, emotional and sexual violence often rise in the aftermath of disaster. Increased harassment and abuse both in the home and relief shelters have been widely reported. Moreover, health care and proper hygiene are often inadequate in shelters, particularly for pregnant,

lactating and menstruating women.

Although women in Bangladesh are vulnerable to climate change, they also use a number of coping strategies. They adjust dietary consumption when certain foods are scarce and preserve food and supplies—such as fuel, matches, blankets, animal fodder and medicine—in preparation for shortages or disaster. Parents teach children important skills such as swimming and impart knowledge on disaster preparedness.

Women often build elevated platforms to help protect children and elderly family members in emergency situations. They are also active participants in recovery strategies such as rebuilding homes and replacing livestock, and are increasingly being recognized as effective leaders and educators on cyclone risk reduction. Both women and men use migration to adapt to limited economic opportunities after disasters.

**POLICY POINT** **Women and the NAPA**—Bangladesh completed its National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2005 and this is in the process of implementation. Although the NAPA mentions women several times, women are generally represented not as participatory actors but as victims of climate impacts. While women are listed both as contributors to the NAPA and stakeholders in the projects, specific information on their participation as stakeholders or as leaders or agents for change is missing.<sup>3</sup>



## Quick Facts

### Environmental Threats

- Land loss
- Coastal erosion
- Rising sea level
- Reduced crop yields
- Frequent natural disasters
- High disaster mortality rate

### Status of Women\*

#### Life expectancy, 2005:

64 female, 62 male

#### Adult literacy rate, 2005:

40.8% female, 53.9% male

#### Enrollment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2005:

56% female, 56% male

#### Income (PPP USD), 2005:

\$1,282 female, \$2,792 male

### Status of Women in Disaster

- Decreased economic opportunities
- Increased vulnerability
- Increased violence, harassment and lack of privacy
- Increased health and mortality risks
- Increased responsibilities

Sources:

WEDO. (2008). “Gender, Climate Change and Human Security: Lessons from Bangladesh, Ghana and Senegal”. New York: WEDO; UNDP. (2007). “Bangladesh”. In 2007/2008 Human Development Report. <[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data\\_sheets/cty\\_ds\\_BGD.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_BGD.html)>.

\*Full indicators are: life expectancy at birth (years), 2005; adult literacy rate (% aged 15 and older), 2005; combined gross enrolment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education (%), 2005; and estimated earned income (PPP USD), 2005.

# Ghana

*“I have seven children (4 boys and 3 girls)...The floods collapsed our three rooms and washed away our crops: maize and late millet. As a result, we harvested nothing. Hunger stared us straight in the face. I have been travelling long distances every morning to collect firewood for sale to feed my family. Getting firewood is now very difficult and most times I have to climb trees to check for dried branches to cut. Sometimes I do this with my 9-month-old baby on my back...”*

—Atibzel Abaande, 45 years,  
Bawku West District, Ghana<sup>4</sup>

Environmental issues in Ghana are often looked at through a gender-neutral lens, even as women and men are differently affected by climate change. Because women have little access to land rights and are responsible for collecting and managing water and wood and selling fish, climate change drastically reduces their ability to perform daily tasks and increases their economic dependence and vulnerability. In addition, women are under-represented in most sectors including politics, business and public services. They have little say in risk-reduction planning, which puts them in greater physical danger in times of disaster and makes them less able to recover in the aftermath.

**FOCUS ON Unpaid Labour and Household Burden**—Ghanaian women spend more than twice as much time as men on household activities such as gathering water,

firewood and food. Women’s unpaid labour is vital to household security but is drastically increasing in the face of climate change as resources become scarce. The segregation of labour deepens the social divide between women and men.

Despite their vulnerabilities, women in Ghana are actively adapting to climate change. By planting long-term crops including oranges, cocoa and palm oil, joining cooperatives to collectively save money and sending family members away to work and send remittances home, women help safeguard the livelihoods of their families.

**POLICY POINT High-level Support**—Following the Earth Summit in 1992, the Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology was established, under which the Committee on Climate Change reviews policies or projects related to climate change, emissions reductions and the improvement of carbon sinks. Ghana’s strong women’s organizations are mobilizing around climate change issues, and they have support from Ghana’s Delegation to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations. Chief Negotiator William K. Agyemang-Bonsu recently stated, “[The] benefits of mainstreaming gender in climate change [include] increased awareness, improved capacity, sensitivity to traditional knowledge and risk reduction”.<sup>5</sup>



## Quick Facts

### Environmental Threats

- Excessive heat
- Torrential rains
- Severe dry winds
- Reduced crop yields
- Decreased natural resources

### Status of Women

**Life expectancy, 2005:**

59.5 female, 58.7 male

**Adult literacy rate, 2005:**

49.8% female, 66.4% male

**Enrollment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2005:**

48% female, 53% male

**Income (PPP USD), 2005:**

\$2,056 female, \$2,893 male

### Status of Women in Disaster

- More difficulty accessing resources
- Decreased economic opportunities
- Increased vulnerability
- Increased domestic violence
- Increased health and mortality risks

Sources:

WEDO (2008). Op. cit.; UNDP. (2007). “Ghana”. In Op. cit. <[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data\\_sheets/cty\\_ds\\_GHA.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_GHA.html)>.

# Nepal

*“There is a great need to document more mountain women’s lives and the gender issues common to the Himalayas. Little research has been pursued on mountain populations, particularly how they adapt to change, and how gender-specific conditions affect their abilities to adapt.”*

—International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)<sup>6</sup>

**W**omen in Nepal, whether members of the Hindi majority, Dalit “untouchables” or from an indigenous ethnic group, experience major challenges when faced with climate change and natural disaster. They have less access to employment than men, are underrepresented in the political sphere, lack sufficient health-care access and are confronted with violence and discrimination in customs and laws. Fewer girls than boys have access to schools, and more women than men are illiterate.

## **FOCUS ON** Double Discrimination for Indigenous and Dalit Women—

While indigenous women living in the Nepalese mountains have a greater degree of freedom and decision-making ability than many Hindi women, they have much less access to technical infrastructure and development efforts and are predominantly illiterate. Dalit women are some of the most underprivileged in the country, shunned for both their caste and gender status. They are highly vulnerable to changes in the climate, which increase their already heavy workload. Moreover, they have little to no access to disaster relief.

Though many barriers exist, a women’s movement is emerging throughout the country to tackle these numerous issues. Nepalese women have a vast knowledge of resource management and work long hours to care for their families and contribute to their communities. Women’s organizations are highlighting women’s important contributions, skills and knowledge, as communities must benefit from their agency and adaptive capacity.

## **POLICY POINT** Involving Women

**At the National Level—**A National Climate Change Policy is in the final draft stages, and several workshops have been held in different regions to help educate the population on climate change and to gather opinions and ideas. Many women participated in these.

Most of the consultations have highlighted that women will probably suffer more from climate change because of their role in collecting water and fuel wood and the fact that these resources are becoming more and more scarce. Women will also have more difficulty adapting to agricultural changes since the burden of agricultural production is rising, and new production practices and new crops will have to be adopted. Women’s very limited access to information and training will surely restrict their capacity to adapt as well.<sup>7</sup>



## Quick Facts

### Environmental Threats

- Drought
- Flooding
- Deglaciation
- Deforestation
- Intensifying monsoons
- Landslides/eroded soils

### Status of Women

#### **Life expectancy, 2005:**

62.9 female, 62.1 male

#### **Adult literacy rate, 2005:**

34.9 female, 62.7 male

#### **Enrollment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2005:**

54% female, 62% male

#### **Income (PPP USD), 2005:**

\$1,038 female, \$2,072 male

### Status of Women in Disaster

- More difficulty accessing resources
- Decreased economic opportunities
- Increased domestic violence
- Increased health risks and disease rates
- Limited coping strategies

Sources:

Leduc, B., Shrestha, A. and Bhattarai, B. (2008). “Gender and Climate Change in the Hindu Kush Himalayas of Nepal”. Commissioned by WEDO; UNDP. (2007). “Nepal”. In Op. cit. <[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data\\_sheets/cty\\_ds\\_NPL.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_NPL.html)>.

# Senegal

*“We the women are responsible for feeding our families. The bush has now become a desert shrub in my area and there is nowhere to go to fetch wood...One day, unable to find enough wood after a long search, I used some branches to cook. Since the wood was not enough, I cut my plastic bassinette in pieces to fuel the fire...Then I took the wooden bench where I was seated and cut it to feed the fire...”*

— Satou Diouf, Gadiag, Senegal<sup>8</sup>

**W**hile Senegal has adopted a number of policies aimed at reducing gender inequality, prohibiting gender discrimination and integrating gender considerations into sectoral development, these commitments rarely impact poor rural women, who are heavily burdened by agriculture and fishing production activities. Climate change makes work more difficult in these sectors as reduced yields and fewer buyers decrease their economic viability.

**FOCUS ON Natural Resource-based Livelihood Insecurity**—Reliant on natural resource collection for basic needs, women’s livelihoods are deeply threatened by climate change. Around 70 per cent of rural Senegalese women are engaged in the agriculture sector, and 90 per cent of labourers in fish processing are women. Climate change further intensifies their workloads as soil erodes on farms and along coastlines and rain patterns become increasingly unpredictable. Desertification has left wood sources scarce, and access to water is increasingly unreliable, of poor quality or costs more than

women can afford. As more men are moving to urban areas in search of employment, women are left to cope in the villages.

Despite heavy work burdens, women in Senegal have been active in climate change adaptation and mitigation. The Regroupement des Femmes de Popenguine, one of many women’s cooperative organizations, has reforested and regenerated mangroves along the Atlantic coast, increasing coastal resilience and fighting deforestation and the destruction of a diverse habitat. Women have also been active in implementing agricultural techniques that help fight soil erosion, increase water supplies and enable plant regeneration and better crop yields.

## **POLICY POINT Women’s Leadership in Climate Change Policy-making**

A National Committee on Climate Change (COMNAC) was set up by the Direction de l’Environnement (Direction of Environment) and employs women in leadership positions. It plays an important role in helping to mainstream gender into national level climate change policy, providing a positive example of a women-led team that can promote the empowerment, inclusion and capacity building of women across the country to adapt to climate change.<sup>9</sup> In preparing the country’s NAPA, women participated in public consultations organized in every region in order to collect information on adaptation solutions at the local level because indigenous knowledge is important to the search for sustainable results.<sup>10</sup>



## Quick Facts

### Environmental Threats

- Drought
- Flooding
- Soil erosion
- Desertification
- Rising temperatures
- Overfishing/poaching

### Status of Women

**Life expectancy, 2005:**

64.4 female, 60.4 male

**Adult literacy rate, 2005:**

29.2% female, 51.1% male

**Enrollment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2005:**

37% female, 42% male

**Income (PPP USD), 2005:**

\$1,256 female, \$2,346 male

### Status of Women in Disaster

- More difficulty accessing resources
- Decreased economic opportunities
- Increased health risks and disease rates
- Limited coping strategies

Sources:

WEDO. (2008). Op. cit.; UNDP. (2007). “Senegal” in Op. cit. <[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data\\_sheets/cty\\_ds\\_SEN.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_SEN.html)>.

# Trinidad and Tobago

*“In spite of their higher educational qualifications, women continue to comprise the majority of the unemployed, underpaid in every sector of employment, except when employed by the State, and in every occupational group. Women’s participation rate in the labour force in 2000 stood at 38.6 per cent compared with 61.4 per cent for men.”*

—Draft National Gender Policy and Action Plan<sup>11</sup>

In Trinidad and Tobago, a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) located off the Northeast coast of Venezuela, women have come close to gaining equity with men on a number of indicators. With almost 100 per cent literacy for both women and men, the school enrolment ratio for girls actually exceeds that of boys. However, the large disparity in earned income between men and women suggests that women are economically vulnerable and thus may be less able to adapt to or recover from climate change or natural disaster.

## **FOCUS ON Exacerbated Health**

**Crisis**—Already existing problems are further exacerbated by climate change threats. HIV and AIDS are increasingly feminized in the Caribbean context, infecting more women than men and further compromising women’s ability to cope with environmental changes

and disaster. A number of key factors continue to drive the spread of HIV and AIDS across the region, including poverty, gender inequality and lack of information—all factors that increase vulnerability to climate change impacts as well.

## **POLICY POINT Context-specific**

**Priorities**—On small islands, the options can sometimes be limited: According to former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “Poverty and population pressure force growing numbers of poor people to live in harm’s way—on flood plains, in earthquake-prone zones and on unstable hillsides.”<sup>12</sup> Trinidad and Tobago’s women and men need more information on environmental stresses, and more data—disaggregated by sex, age and other factors—is urgently needed to build more comprehensive policies.

Few—if any—of Trinidad and Tobago’s environmental policies include gender issues or prioritize mainstreaming gender. But for SIDS, the issue is urgent: climate change is not a future possibility but a real threat facing island populations now. Women’s organizations need to support the Government in finding ways to make policies more effective—and that means responding to the needs and building on the capacities of both women and men.



## Quick Facts

### Environmental Threats

- Flooding
- Landslides
- Windstorms
- Heavy rains
- Desertification
- Soil degradation
- Increased drought
- Intensified hurricanes
- Unsustainable forestry

### Status of Women

**Life expectancy, 2005:**

71.2 female, 67.2 male

**Adult literacy rate, 2005:**

97.8 female, 98.9 male

**Enrollment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2005:**

66% female, 64% male

**Income (PPP USD), 2005:**

\$9,307 female, \$20,053 male

### Status of Women in Disaster

- Decreased economic opportunities
- Increased vulnerability
- Increased health risks and disease rates

Sources:

Attzs, M. (2008). “Gender and Climate Change in Trinidad and Tobago”. Commissioned by WEDO; UNDP. (2007). “Trinidad and Tobago”. In Op. cit. <[http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data\\_sheets/cty\\_ds\\_TTO.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_TTO.html)>.

# Partnering on Climate Change

Developing South-South and South-North partnerships is critical. Knowledge sharing, capacity building and climate change responses initiated in the global South have real benefits for women.

The mission of **ActionAid Bangladesh** is to eradicate poverty and injustice by working with the poor to encourage participation and empowerment in sustainable development. The organization funds gender and climate change research and strongly promotes gender sensitivity and women's rights within its projects. [www3.actionaid.org/bangladesh](http://www3.actionaid.org/bangladesh)

**ABANTU for Development** aims to increase the decision-making capacity of women and to challenge gender inequalities and injustices throughout West Africa. In conjunction with the **Regional Office for Western Africa (ROWA)** based in Accra, **Ghana**, ABANTU-ROWA coordinates programmes with a focus on critical issues such as governance and poverty through which women are engaged in decision-making and learn effective political participation and leadership skills. [www.abantu-roesa.org](http://www.abantu-roesa.org)

Based in Kathmandu, **Nepal**, the **International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)** partners with international and regional institutions to address climate change issues in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. ICIMOD understands that climate change and poverty affect women and men differently and strives to mainstream gender into all aspects of the organization and to empower the mountain women living in these countries. [www.icimod.org](http://www.icimod.org)

**Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA)** collaborates with grassroots organizations in various countries including **Senegal** to support activities related to environment and development, including work that incorporates gender and development into the climate change debate. [www.enda.sn/english/index.htm](http://www.enda.sn/english/index.htm)

The **Sustainable Economic Development Unit (SEDU)** of The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in **Trinidad and Tobago** conducts research and determines best practices on sustainable development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Core areas of research include sustainable human development and vulnerability and adaptation to climate change and natural disaster. [www2.sta.uwi.edu/sedu](http://www2.sta.uwi.edu/sedu)

The **Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA)** is a network of over 30 United Nations agencies and civil society organizations working together to ensure climate change decision-making processes, policies and programmes at all levels are gender responsive. Members include WEDO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Oxfam International, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), ENERGIA and Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and National Resource Management (WOCAN). They engage in advocacy activities, trainings and capacity-building projects, resource generation and sharing, and more. [www.gender-climate.org](http://www.gender-climate.org)

# References

<sup>1</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). (2008). "Case Study: Gender, Human Security and Climate Change: Lessons from Bangladesh, Ghana and Senegal". New York: WEDO. <<http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/hsn-study-final-may-20-2008.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> WEDO. (2008). Op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Bangladesh. (2005). "National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA)". Ministry of Environment and Forest. November. <<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/napa/bano1.pdf>>

<sup>4</sup> WEDO. (2008). Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> WEDO-Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA). (2009). Side Event. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Meeting. Bonn, Germany. 1 June.

<sup>6</sup> Leduc, B., Shrestha, A. and Bhattarai, B. (2008). "Gender and Climate Change in the Hindu Kush Himalayas of Nepal." International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) for WEDO. P. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Pp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> WEDO. (2008). Op. cit. P. 26

<sup>9</sup> Government of Senegal (2006). "Plan d'Action National Pour l'Adaption aux Changements Climatique". Ministère de l'Environnement et de la Protection to la Nature. <<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/napa/senoif.pdf>>; and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), WEDO and Global Fund for Women (2008). "Final Report: Gender and Climate Change Workshop". Dakar, Senegal. 2–3 June. <<http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/finalreport-dakar-workshop-2008.pdf>>

<sup>10</sup> WEDO. (2008). Op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Centre for Gender and Development Studies at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine. (2004). "Draft National Gender Policy and Action Plan". Submitted to the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs, Trinidad and Tobago. P. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Annan, K. (2004). "Opening Remarks". Fourth Forum on the International Decade for National Disaster Reduction. Quoted in Attz, M. (2008). "Gender and Climate Change in Trinidad and Tobago". "Sustainable Economic Development Unit (SEDU)/UWI for WEDO. P. 7.



**United Nations Population Fund**

[www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)



**Women's Environment &  
Development Organization**

[www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org)