

Gender and desertification

In many of the world's dry, agricultural areas, including much of Africa, it is traditionally women who devote time and effort to the land.¹



The range of measures often emphasized in gendered efforts to reverse desertification and land degradation and mitigate the effects of drought (DLDD) include improving the participation of women in decision-making, building the capacity of women's organizations, eliminating illiteracy among women, minimizing the heavy workload on women and eliminating gender disparities in employment and in the access to and ownership of resources. This fact sheet draws attention to the complex and evolving nature of gender issues pertaining to drylands women.

Women's unequal access to productive assets exacerbates land degradation

Many people living in the drylands engage in agricultural and pastoral activities. Communities engaged in these activities however, display different patterns of asset ownership and access. For example, among agricultural communities, men own the land and produce cash crops, and thus, obtain credit and other facilities. Women, on the other hand, rarely own land and are often confined to the production of subsistence foods. In Uganda, for example, although 97% of women have access to land, 8% have leaseholds, but only 7% actually own land and have access to credit (UN-Habitat: 2002). In such communities, women's access to critical resources is mediated by relationships with men. This places female-headed households at an even greater disadvantage.

By contrast, in pastoral communities, assets tend to be communally owned, thus men and women generally have equal access. Yet, as with the women in agricultural communities, pastoral women may face just as great challenges in accessing crucial resources. For example, among many pastoral communities, men, who are mainly concerned with providing livestock, which is a source of income and prestige for them, manage the water points. These water points often have no taps for women to draw domestic water. Consequently, women are forced to fetch water at the cattle troughs used and contaminated by animals.

Women are key players in both the agricultural and pastoral production processes. They are the primary natural resource managers, providers of food security, and repositories of knowledge and expertise on indigenous plants, medicines, food and water. These are crucial roles when dealing with soil fertility and crop failure in degraded and drought-prone areas. Women in areas affected by drought and desertification, however, are generally engaged in subsistence and small economies and are therefore more vulnerable than men to the negative impacts of global economic, technological and cultural transformation processes.

For example, the restoration of degraded soils requires the supplemental use of new technologies. Such technologies are usually transferred through agricultural extension systems staffed by male officers who are more comfortable working with male producers. In some cases, local cultural norms make it difficult or even impossible for male extension workers to interact with female producers. Consequently, women often do not receive information about new technologies, while men also obtain most of the direct benefits during the initial set-up and implementation stages of the new technology.

Without ownership of assets such as land, women cannot access credit and extension and technological services. This, in turn, affects their ability to sustain their

¹ Koffi Annan, 2005



families and manage other natural resources that lay the foundation of sustainable production systems. It deepens their exclusion from participation in land conservation and development projects, agricultural extension work and policy-making processes. Consequently, the land they depend on for their income is easily and continually degraded.

Asset ownership and access to land also have a bearing on people's vulnerability to disasters and risk. Although both the rich and poor are affected when disasters from desertification, land degradation and drought arise, the poor, especially women, are hardest hit because their ability to cope with and recover from these phenomena depend on access to assets such as land, and the ability to mobilize resources. For example, when drought strikes, an individual, group or community can invest its assets in another area to meet short-term needs. As the most disadvantaged in asset access and ownership, drylands women encounter great difficulty in adjusting to extreme effects related to DLDD, such as those anticipated from climate change.

Cultural breakdown overburdens women

The gender-division of labor is prevalent among many drylands communities. In their daily chores, men focus on market-oriented activities such as crop or livestock production. Women carry out household and farm chores that include nurturing the land, growing food crops, collecting firewood and fetching water.

These role boundaries are breaking down with the growth of environmental migrants. Although women make up half the number of international migrants, men have constituted a majority of the rural to urban seasonal and permanent environmental migrants elicited mainly by drought in the drylands. These developments have a profound impact on families, with unequal consequences on men and women.

When men migrate, women take on the additional roles of cash crop and livestock production and marketing, and become providers of security for the young and aged. This increases women's workload and responsibilities, even as it enables them to become key decision-makers at the household level. By contrast, the men left behind do not necessarily become caregivers or take on new domestic roles. Where the migration is seasonal, crises of leadership develop upon the return of men.

Mainstreaming gender in drylands

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) advances a bottom-up

approach that targets gender issues and rights-based policies. The Convention's Preamble emphasizes the role played by women in regions affected by desertification and/or drought and the importance of ensuring the full participation of both men and women at all levels in programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought. Gender integration is the norm in the Convention's national action programmes as evidenced by a recent review of gender mainstreaming in decision-making at the national level (Knabe and Poulsen: 2004).

Even so, greater attention to drylands women in the implementation of the Convention is warranted in light of the increased vulnerability of women to the effects of drought due to existing resource inequalities and shifting gender roles associated with forced migration, and in the context of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008-2018). Gender mainstreaming should aim to improve the livelihoods of women living in the drylands, enhance the realization of global benefits and promote partnerships in the attainment of both these goals.



Policy attention needs to address women's ownership and access to productive and other resources such as advisory services and farm inputs that are provided to men in the same communities. Considering their knowledge management roles, priority needs to be given to the design of technologies and policies that are relevant to women and build on their

knowledge, and to the involvement of women in decision-making.

Establishing partnerships and forums, enhancing capacities, promoting better access to educational opportunities and health care and legalizing women's land rights and developing gender-sensitive land ownership regimes are part of the solution. Incorporating gender issues into the entire project life-cycle stages of initiatives supported by financial mechanisms and organizations that promote sustainable land management in drylands would reinforce these measures. To this end, relevant studies providing insight into dryland women's access to and ownership of assets and gender roles, including women's contributions to carbon offsetting, water management, sustainable use of biodiversity and payment for environmental services, are indispensable.

In conclusion, policies that target women need to pay attention to the different forms and hierarchies of gender discrimination. The connection between ecosystem type, cultural practices and primary economic production all need to be taken into account in addressing gender concerns in the drylands.