



we've got male

# Chairs for Women at the Climate Talks

by Shailendra Yashwant

**A Cavernous Chamber.** The United Nations-led discussions on climate change has been one of many processes that most communities, especially women have had political and practical difficulties to penetrate. Unless more women from the global South meaningfully participate in this most critical process, the future will become even bleaker.

Photo by Chris Erbach from Wikimedia Commons

*Eighty-five per cent of people who die from climate-induced disasters are women. Seventy-five per cent of environmental refugees are women. Seventy per cent of the world's poor, considered the most vulnerable to the ravages of climate change, are women.*

**While** all evidence points to the fact that women's lives are more at risk because of climate change, the role of women has largely been neutered in the predominantly scientific and economic language of the current debates at the United Nations (UN).

Despite the presence of hordes of women in the corridors of the UN, one rarely hears of official interventions that demand inclusion of women in the decision-making processes even in the discussions on adaptation and mitigation. Instead, people are caught up in the intricacies and technicalities of text and punctuation marks, a clear sign of the increasingly recalcitrant positions of developed countries on emission targets and historical responsibilities.

The upcoming Copenhagen Summit in December 2009 will provide yet another space in influencing global policy and campaigning for gender equality on environmental protection. This is the most critical period in the history of humankind as important decisions will be made about our relationship with the environment in the near future. If the world leaders once more fail to include women and their voices in the debates and discourses, then humanity is losing vital inputs that may prove the key to adapting to climate change.

In September 2009, Liberian President who is also Africa's first female Head of State Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was joined by Finnish



### **Threatening Tides.**

*Women constitute more than 70 per cent of climate refugees. While both women and men witness the same water level rise, they are disproportionately affected by the flooding. Given the women's limited mobility in terms of their cultural, social, economic and political regimes, women are facing more vulnerabilities and risks than men.*

**Source:** UNIFEM. (ed). "Women, Climate Change and Refugees."  
URL: <http://www.unifem.org.au/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=40061>

Photo from One World South Asia.  
<http://southasia.oneworld.net/ImageCatalog/climate-refugee.jpg>

President Tarja Halonen in calling for an increased presence of women in the climate change talks. They also asserted that the need to create an enabling environment for the participation

of women at all levels in decisions making. They added that climate change-related financing should be gender sensitive.

That the call came from an African woman, is of particular importance. The global South is expected to bear the brunt of increasing temperatures and sea levels and much of the community's struggles with the changes in the environment are marked on women's bodies. Yet the same bodies are key to the community's survival and endurance in the critical years ahead.

Long before climate change dominated the popular environmental discourse, indigenous women have been resisting, mitigating and even reversing the impacts of climate change. Their understanding of environmental stress transcends science and statistics. Moreover, it includes a deep appreciation of climate change's socio-economic impacts as women are often responsible for the provision of food, fuel, shelter, water and medicine for their families.

Throughout the world, hundreds of millions of indigenous women and men, who manage their forests and crops sustainably contribute to the sequestration of greenhouse gas (GHG) from the atmosphere. Traditionally, indigenous women have been the custodians of biodiversity for many of the world's ecosystems. They have been practitioners of medicine, botany, nutrition and keepers of agricultural technologies.

Indigenous women may easily have the smallest carbon footprint on earth, given their sustainable

livelihood practices such as swidden farming, pastoralism, hunting and gathering. Their production of basic goods and services often use environmentally friendly and renewable resources. Indigenous peoples in India, Thailand, China and Burma continue to practice rotational agriculture, with very limited or no use of petroleum fertilisers. As a result, they produce minimal GHG. The conserved forests in their domain and sustainable use of agricultural lands provide the additional benefit of a healthy ecosystem that helps preserve biodiversity and provides a sink for GHG emissions.

It is important that their wisdom and knowledge on resource management and adaptation are taken into account. As the international community develops policies and mechanisms to respond to climate change, gender mainstreaming will be especially critical in at least three areas: disaster risk reduction (DRR) planning and implementation at local, national and regional levels; the creation of each country's Nation Adaptation Programmes of Actions (NAPAs); and in the numerous climate funds that are in the process of being established within the UN. In addition, there is a need to ensure that any gender mainstreaming will not end up reinforcing oppressive patriarchal processes such as those of the World Bank's climate funds, instead of introducing fundamental reforms towards genuine gender equity.

Even in the developed countries, women and men perceive the cause of climate change differently. In Germany, more than 50 per cent of women, compared to only 40 per cent of men, rate climate change brought about by global warming as extremely dangerous. Women also believe that each individual can contribute toward protecting the climate through one's individual actions. However, policy planning does not reflect in any way these perceptions.

Although the presence of women in a governmental body does not necessarily yield gender-sensitive policies, there are nonetheless positive results when more women are given

public mandates. In countries with a higher proportion of women in government, more environmental treaties are ratified. Greater representation of women as policy makers has also led to the inclusion of multi-issue social agendas in Europe.

Women's rights organisations have begun to make their appearance at high-level climate change discussions, questioning the dominance of market-driven solutions such as carbon trading to curb emissions. As Yifat Susskind of MADRE asserted, carbon trading merely "allows companies with high carbon emissions to fund projects that supposedly absorb carbon in exchange for their continued pollution. [This] does not address the root cause of climate change, which is unsustainable use of resources. It simply enables the continued emission of carbon. In a perverse way, [it] creates an incentive for carbon pollution by turning emissions into a tradable commodity."

At the international level, women's rights groups and other non-government organisations (NGOs) have been documenting the impact of climate change on women. Aside from turning their research as a basis for advocacy and campaigns, they are also building the capacity of local organisations and regional networks to integrate a feminist analysis of climate change in their work.

An interesting example of such an intervention is Oxfam's innovative "The Sisters on the

Planet," a multi-platform project, about a group of women who are leading the fight against climate change in their communities. Each woman profiled in the expanding network is leading a community response to climate change.

Aside from DRR, NAPA and climate change financing, more and more women's voices need to be heard as population control is increasingly being promoted as a climate change solution. Climate change has become another justification to control women's fertility, in violation of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Injecting the argument for population control in the climate talks only muddies the already complicated policy debates and discourses in both climate change and SRHR. By placing task of cleaning up the world on women's bodies, the argument contributes in obfuscating historical responsibility. Similarly, it further downplays reproductive justice as the sexual desires of the poor and other marginalised people will be the hardest hit of any population control measures.

As the climate regime will have long-lasting and wide-reaching impact, women and gender must be at the core of its institutions and processes. Unless we want a world ravaged by droughts and floods, we have to further demand that women be treated not only as vulnerable sector but as equal stakeholders. ■

**Keeping the Planet in Place.**

*Despite their immense contribution to communities and households and at the same time their vulnerability to the changes in the environment, women's voices have yet to be heard and heeded. Oxfam's "Sisters on the Planet" is one of the emerging initiatives in upholding women's role in averting climate change.*

Photo from A Climate for Change.



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