

Economic Participation and Climate change: The case of women and children in Swaziland

Swaziland has one of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS in the world. The consequences of this pandemic are far and wide, especially for women and children. This article serves to illustrate that in addition to the challenges that this presents, the plight of the hardships faced by women and children in Swaziland is further exacerbated by the implications of climate change. In this small Southern African Kingdom, much has been publicized about the effects of climate change - particularly of the effects of the droughts on imports and exports. Focus has been placed on the impacts of climate change on food production and on hydrology and water resources. The impact that does not receive the attention it deserves is the amplification of vulnerability, especially for women and children particularly the rural poor whose livelihoods heavily depend on natural resources for agricultural production.

The Inter Press Service News Agency which reports on news and views from the Global South defines climate change as referring to unsustainable human consumption and production systems driving changes in average temperatures and weather patterns. Climate change has fast become a prominent environmental and developmental issue and has frequently been called "the challenge of our time". Because Swaziland has an economy highly reliant on agricultural production, natural disasters such as prolonged droughts produce adverse socio-economic problems. The present system of traditional agricultural production, allows for mass consumption of land to produce crops. Unfortunately, crops are being lost due to droughts, and pest infestations – which cause hardships on farmers, their households, and their communities.

Climate change related problems increase production costs which in turn get passed on to the consumer in the form of higher food and higher prices. We are now tasked with producing more food than we ever had to before under a more turbulent environment than ever before. Either we find very innovative ways of sustainably producing more food on the same piece of land, or perhaps change the dynamics involved in the production of growing food altogether. The droughts have worsened the insecurities of the already at risk populations which includes poor women and children.

A large body of literature points to the fact that natural disasters are not gender neutral; that extents of vulnerability to environmental challenges differ among different age groups and gender. It is the intention of this article to highlight the case that women and children pay a higher cost of environmental degradation. First in Swaziland, women make up 53% of the population in a country with 63% of the population living in poverty, therefore solving the problems of women is solving the problems of the majority of the population. Second, a 2013 UNICEF study on Child and Orphan Poverty in Swaziland indicated that children were 48% of the population but were 70% of the poor. Indeed, women and children make up the poor and most vulnerable population in the country.

It doesn't end there, national statistics support that women are amongst the most vulnerable in the country and it is the vulnerable groups which experience an intensification of challenges under additional vulnerability to the environment. Women and children suffer the most in times of drought as they are the ones tasked with finding alternative water sources and often walk long distances in search of drinkable water to satisfy their household needs. The Swaziland Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2009/10 reported female-headed households as having higher poverty incidence at 67% when compared to their male counterparts at 59%. Furthermore, the Labour Force Survey provides that between 2001 and 2010, unemployment

for women rose from 29.7% to 31.3% while for men there was a decrease from 29.7% to 25.7%. Suffice to say, women need distinctive consideration. There is an African Proverb which says “*when you educate a man, you educate an individual yet when you educate a woman you educate a community*”. Women are the minders of children and caretakers for the elderly, when disaster management strategies target women, the impact has positive effects on children and the elderly, benefitting households.

Noting that 70% of the population lives in rural areas and that 89% of the poor live in rural areas in an economy which is predominantly depend on agriculture; pro-longed drought results in disturbing levels of food insecurity. Child poverty and extreme poverty are generally a rural problem following the fact that a large majority of the population resides in rural areas as above-mentioned. 91% of poor children and 96% of extremely poor children are rural (UNICEF). Due to drought children in the rural areas experience difficulties in accessing clean and safe water sources therefore become susceptible to a number of diseases such as diarrhea. On top of proving to present challenges in access to clean water, rural areas have problems in access to adequate sanitation; electricity connection is pricey; and residents travel long distances to access health service and children walk far to get to school.

Drought shortens rainfall and limits arable land. Drought adds strain to already fragile rural households predominately deriving their livelihoods from subsistence agriculture. Moreover, drought further limits access and control over resources. Women’s increased vulnerability to climate change is connected to the fact that women have fewer resources and therefore low adaptive capacities. In Swaziland, women generally have lower economic status than men as the 2013-2014 Draft Labor Force Survey (LFS) indicates that male earnings are 67% higher than those of women. Additionally, the LFS indicates female labour participation rate at only 45% and women participation in the labour force as lower in all the regions as well as across rural and urban dimensions.

In a 1994 article published in the journal *Focus on Women*, Wilfred Tichagwa advances reasons why droughts are more harmful to women than men. Tichagwa advocates that drought can have economic, social, health, and environmental effects on women. His argument centers on the notion that women’s workload increases in times of drought. Women are primarily responsible for meeting the food needs of the family. In times of drought, rural women have to walk longer distances to fetch water and firewood (often on foot) and this poses health risks. To evidence this, the Swaziland Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2010 confirms that for households without drinking water on premises, those typically responsible for collecting drinking water was 69% women. Women have unique expertise and experience as they also pass on their skills to their children on how to manage water collection and how to collect firewood, skills are a vital household asset – especially during drought.

At a global level, there has been renewed emphasis on the importance of gender issues in climate change debates. This emphasis has been advanced through the international environmental treaty - the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). During the 2005 Conference on the Parties (COP 11), NGOs inputted that more women should have representation in climate change discussions. This suggestion was put into action a decade later, in 2015, when the Women’s Earth & Climate Action Network (WECAN International) played an active role in the exercise to form a global agreement to confront climate change through COP 21.

Likewise, promoting gender equality and empowering women is a stand-alone goal in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This shows commitment to gender-focused approaches to tackling world challenges including climate change. The relationship with numerous others goals gives the indication that a gendered perspective is a critical lens necessary to

solve developmental problems to accelerate the Kingdoms efforts to become a developed country.

Locally, so much more work needs to be done for gender-specific strategies to be identified, and effectively implemented. Linkages between gender and climate change remain in need of greater recognition. Adaptive interventions need to bear in mind the cultural norms; unequal distribution of roles, resources and power. This builds the case for strategies which need to mark the appropriate target. The same economic and societal roles that make women more vulnerable to the effects of climate change are also the same key challenges which mark women as key actors for driving sustainable development.

To-date, the National Development Strategy (NDS) pronounces that the country mainstream climate change into national development and sectoral planning and budgeting. Swaziland now has a National Climate Change Policy and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) was established to promote disaster reduction programmes and awareness campaigns to drastically reduce disaster risk and strengthen disaster victims' resilience especially for drought victims.

The drought provides well needed lessons for the country as the last phase of implementing the NDS sets in. There is need to reduce gender disparities in climate vulnerability, the socio-economic differences between men and women need more vigorous interrogation so as to ease gender roles which increase vulnerability to climate change. At the first instance, more research at the regional level is necessary to assess the socio-economic differences which need to be understood for adaptation and mitigation of the effects of climate change. Secondly, women need appropriate representation at all levels of climate agreements in order to contribute their distinctive experience of how to adapt to climate change. Climate change interventions must not exclude women as they are powerful change agents. Through a gendered review of strategies, Swaziland can address a range of economic, social and environmental issues.

Sustainability and effectiveness of climate change projects and policies can be strengthened through women's greater participation. As Carvajal-Escobar, Quintero-Angel & M. Garcia-Vargas (2008) put it, women tend to be very effective at mobilizing communities in the event of disasters and disaster risk management and reduction and have a clear understanding of what strategies are needed at the local level. This articles has defined the next move that is necessary, through collective action, and assistance, there is the gap that needs to be filled by structurally allowing women's role in the mitigation of the effects of climate change. This cannot happen overnight, indeed yet through advocacy, lobbying and strategic partnerships, this can become a reality.

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