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Women Most at Risk from Climate Disasters, Says UN Report

Investment in Green Technologies Can Improve Women's Climate Adaptation Capacity & Livelihood Opportunities

Increase in Human Trafficking Associated with Climate-related Disasters

Durban / Nairobi, 6 December 2011 - Women, particularly those living in mountain regions in developing countries, are facing disproportionately high risks to their livelihoods and health from climate change, as well as associated risks such as human trafficking, according to a new report from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Investing in low carbon, resource efficient green technologies, water harvesting and fuel wood alternatives can strengthen climate change adaptation and improve women's livelihoods, says the report, *Women at the Frontline of Climate Change: Gender Risks and Hopes*, released at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP17) in Durban, South Africa,

Impacts of climate change, such as droughts, floods and mud slides are affecting a growing number of people worldwide. From 1999–2008, floods affected almost one billion people in Asia, 28 million in the Americas, 22 million in Africa and four million in Europe.

In parts of Asia and Africa, where the majority of the agricultural workforce are female, the impacts of such disasters have a major impact on women's income, food security and health. Women are responsible for about 6 per cent of household food production in Asia and 75 per cent in Africa.

“Women often play a stronger role than men in the management of ecosystem services and food security. Hence, sustainable adaptation must focus on gender and the role of women if it is to become successful”, said UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner.

“Women's voices, responsibilities and knowledge on the environment and the challenges they face will need to be made a central part of Governments' adaptive responses to a rapidly changing climate.” he added.

According to the report, women in communities vulnerable to climate change are often more likely than men to lose their lives during natural disasters, due to poor access to coping strategies such as basic lifesaving skills or cultural factors that restrict the mobility of women.

Human Trafficking & Climate Disasters

The reports also highlights how organized human trafficking, especially that of women, is emerging as a potentially serious risk associated with climate-related disasters; as floods or landslides disrupt social safety nets, leaving more women isolated and vulnerable.

In Nepal, estimates based on emerging data from anti- trafficking organizations, such as Maiti Nepal, suggest that trafficking may have increased from an estimated 3,000-5,000 people (mostly women, as well as children and youth of both sexes between the ages of 7 and 21) in the 1990s to current levels of 12,000–20,000 per year. Approximately 30 percent of these end up in forced labour and 70 per cent are exploited in the sex industry.

The data suggests that human trafficking increases by around 20 to 30 per cent during disasters. The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) has also warned that climate disasters may increase the exposure of women to trafficking as families are disrupted and livelihoods are lost.

Role of Women in Boosting Food Security and Strengthening Adaptation

Research by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows that providing women, who make up around 40 to 50 per cent of the work force in agriculture, with the same access as men to productive resources and technologies could increase yields on farms managed by women by between 20 and 30 per cent.

This could substantially improve food security by raising agricultural output in developing countries by up to 4 per cent.

However, several dynamics make adaptation more difficult for some women due to a lack of access to formal education, poverty, discrimination in food distribution, food insecurity, limited access to resources, exclusion from policy- and decision-making institutions and processes and other forms of social marginalization.

The UNEP report focuses in particular on women in Asia's mountain regions. With more than half of South Asia's cereal production taking place downstream from the Hindu Kush Himalaya, the impacts of climate change, such as droughts or flooding, on food security and livelihoods are keenly felt – especially by women – in this region and beyond.

Women on the Frontline of Climate Change

Due to the key roles women play in agriculture, forest economies, biodiversity and other sectors, particularly in developing countries, designing adaptation programmes with a strong focus on gender equity is vital for successful climate change mitigation.

This is among several recommendations put forward in the UNEP report, including greater investments in green, labour-saving technologies such as irrigation systems or water harvesting, which can improve the quality of life and increase the productivity of female farm workers,

while also benefiting the environment, through replacing fuel wood often collected by women with cleaner fuel alternatives, for example.

Notes to Editors

The report “Women and climate change: Gender risks and hopes” can be accessed at <http://www.grida.no/publications/rr/women-and-climate-change/> and includes high and low resolution graphics for free use in publications.

The report was prepared by UNEP’s GRID Arendal / Rapid response Unit in cooperation with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and INTERPOL.

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