Summary Document and Analysis

Women, Peace and Security in the Context of Climate Change

Introduction

The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda provides a useful framework to further explore the linkages between climate change and its potential impacts on peace and security from a gender perspective. Yet, when the WPS agenda was first concretized through the UN system in resolution 1325 (2000), it did not address insecurities for women that arise from climate-related development and conflict challenges. Nor did this resolution provide any specific mention for how women could be agents of mitigating climate-related degradation and social tension. However, principles from resolution 1325 (2000) can be applied to the climate change field. It is critical that, moving forward, the international community recognize this linkage and catalyze policymaking and practice that bridge the WPS agenda and the climate change agenda.

On January 15, 2015, the United Arab Emirates Mission to the United Nations, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, and UN Women hosted a panel on women, peace and security in the context of climate change. H.E. Lana Zaki Nusseibeh, Permanent Representative of the UAE to the United Nations, delivered opening remarks to contextualize the issue and moderated a panel of four experts; Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to United Nations Secretary-General on the Millennium Development Goals; Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women; Susan Markham, United States Agency for International Development Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment; and, Eleanor Blomstrom, Program Director and Head of Office at the Women’s Environment and Development Organization.

The main objective of the panel was to share best practices and lessons learned on mainstreaming gender across climate change mitigation and management efforts, including by promoting and prioritizing women’s agency, leadership, and participation across all decision-making, planning, and implementation levels.
The experts emphasized that women are the most vulnerable to climate change in poor and rural areas, and therefore must be empowered to respond to the impacts of climate change. Jeffrey Sachs stressed the importance of women’s and girl’s access to education as a key to addressing climate change. Lakshmi Puri recognized that empowering women is central to finding sustainable solutions to both of these defining crises of our time – climate change and peace and security. The experts teased out the nuances linking climate change to the exacerbation of conflict, which disproportionately burdens women and girls, highlighting the necessity of women’s contributions and participation in adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Climate change remains one of the most significant challenges to the achievement of sustainable development, adversely affecting women and girls, who constitute the majority of the world’s poor. The impacts of climate change – extreme weather, droughts, and floods, amongst many others – have increased the vulnerability and insecurity of women and girls around the world. This is exacerbated by a lack of robust decision-making power for women within local communities. This often impedes the ability of women to participate in community-based adaptation and mitigation strategies. At the policy-making level, women remain under-represented in leadership and decision-making processes, as well. Yet, women play a vital role in ensuring the food, water, and energy security for their families and remain keenly aware of mitigation and adaptation strategies.

**Community-level tensions**

In the developing world, women farmers produce 45-80% of all food. Approximately two-thirds of female workers in these countries are engaged in agricultural work; in Africa alone, 90% of the female labor force work in the agricultural sector. (UN Women, Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change, 2009). The impacts of climate change have made these processes more difficult, disproportionately burdening women at the community level.

Within rural communities, women are primarily responsible for providing food, clean water, and energy to their households. The onset of droughts, floods, soil erosion, and other forms of land degradation have made these processes more difficult, exacerbating existing drivers of conflict, such as poverty, weak institutions, and political instability. All of these factors have implications for gender equality.

Women are forced to travel farther to acquire these necessities and, in this process, have become more vulnerable to gender-based violence, far from the protection of their communities. The additional time spent procuring these necessities has caused a decrease in the amount of time
that women and girls spend on education and other activities. This also takes away time spent as caregivers and health care providers for family members.

Natural disasters

During natural disasters, women comprise one of the most vulnerable populations. Due to cultural barriers, illiteracy, and a lack of access to information, women and children are 14 times more likely to die during natural disasters than men (Peterson, 2007). In the 1991 cyclone disaster that killed 140,000 in Bangladesh, 90% of the victims were women (Aguilar, 2004).

Largely, women tend to have less access to early warning systems, as well as disaster-preparedness trainings. After natural disasters strike, women tend to have less access to shelters, food, and healthcare. When women are able to access shelters, they can expose women to harassment and other unsafe situations (Davis et al., 2005).

Lakshmi Puri shared the example of the 2004 tsunami, which killed nearly one in five displaced women, more than twice the mortality rate of displaced men. She emphasized that “a lack of access to information and resources, entrenched gender stereotypes and inequalities, and cultural restrictions makes women and girls among the most susceptible to climate risks.” Eleanor Blomstrom made clear that when there is not a coordinated effort to do gender-sensitive disaster reduction and response, there is an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, as well as in public health problems. As such, it is crucial that emergency humanitarian relief addresses the specific needs of women and girls.

Forced Migration

It is estimated that by 2050, anywhere between 25 million and 1 billion people will be forced to migrate due to climate change, depending on the size and magnitude of a number of climate scenarios. Climate change has led to higher levels of displacement, where people are forced to leave their communities due to environmental degradation and natural disasters.

Women and men face different challenges in migration, where women are often left disproportionately vulnerable to due to structural, cultural, social and economic challenges. Rural women, who make up one quarter of the world’s population, have fared the worst in virtually all of the Millennium Development Goals, when compared with men in their same socio-economic bracket, as well as urban men and women. (Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women, 2012).
In the context of depleted natural resources or natural disasters, many people are forced to migrate in search of livelihoods. When male family members migrate, female members are often left without a breadwinner and must cope with a reduced environment of security for their families. As de facto heads of household, women are often required to perform their traditional roles as caregivers, in addition to earning income in order to support their families. Migration, more generally, has the potential to exacerbate social tensions and exacerbate conflict.

When women must migrate in search of work, they are left without the security of their communities and left vulnerable. They are often easy targets for exploitation by human traffickers and smugglers when negotiating so-called work contracts. When women migrate from rural to urban areas, they are often unable to secure employment in the formal labor market due to a lack of identity documents and the assumption that they are dependents, and thus less deserving of wage labor.

**Gender-Sensitive Climate Policy in the International Arena**

At the international level, women remain underrepresented in climate change policy-making. Within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), there has been much progress towards closing this gap, though challenges remain. There are currently thirty-two current decisions that reference gender. Five of these refer to gender balance and increasing women’s participation on boards and bodies; eight of these decisions acknowledged the need for a gender-sensitive approach and gender balance (UNFCC Decisions and Conclusions: Existing Mandates and Entry Points for Gender Equality, 2014, VI).

Out of the five main areas of negotiations within the UNFCCC – adaptation, capacity-building, finance, mitigation, and technology – adaptation boasts the most gender-sensitive language, with a total of ten decisions integrating gender references. This contrasts to the mitigation area of negotiation, which has the lowest number of references to gender. In fact, there are currently no guiding decisions for gender-sensitive mitigation activities (UNFCC Decisions and Conclusions, 2014, VI).

UNFCC boards and bodies, which have the specific mandate to target gender balance, also lag behind on implementation. The highest concentration of women within a UNFCC body is the Consultative Group of Experts, where 40% of current members are women, followed by the Standing Committee on Finance, which comprises 37% of female participation. One-quarter of the Adaptation Committee members are women. Fewer than 15% of the members on the Technology Executive Committee, the Climate Technology Centre and Network Advisory Board,
Empowerment and Solutions

Empowering women is central to finding sustainable solutions to the defining crises of our time – climate change, and its potential impacts on peace and security from a gender perspective. Lakshmi Puri continually emphasized this point throughout her remarks, noting that “women’s participation and leadership in addressing both of these challenges have never been more relevant or urgent.” As women comprise the primary providers of food, water, and energy for their families, they remain acutely aware of ways to mitigate and adapt to climate change. As a key adaptive strategy to empty wells, women in Nigeria are harvesting rainwater and purchasing water from vendors. This decreases the distance that women and girls must travel to fetch water.

Additionally, the role of women in mitigation measures should not be underestimated. For example, women in developing countries have the potential to reduce or store greenhouse gases. The use of efficient energy systems at the household level, such as special cooking stoves or ovens, could reduce emissions and harness the potential of women as actors for mitigation. In Ghana, the Ghana Bamboo Bikes Initiative provides income to women by training them to build bamboo bikes, while mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Women around the world are also involved in natural resource and forest conservation. Besides firewood, women retrieve food and medicinal plants from forests, for direct usage or to contribute to their family income. The role that women play in reforestation and caring for forests leads to lower levels of greenhouse gasses being emitted into the atmosphere, which directly mitigates the impacts of climate change. Women farmers in Guatemala are planting trees to improve farming techniques and sequester carbon.

Women need to share this knowledge within their communities, and hold greater decision-making power regarding community adaptation and mitigation strategies. However, it is not solely important to have women in leadership positions; it is critical that we “empower the middle,” as Eleanor Blomstrom so duly notes. Empowering the middle is critical to connecting all levels of climate change policies and strategies – at the local, national, and international levels. Through this process, it is also important that women build and grow networks to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.
In her remarks, Susan Markham highlighted the importance of women’s responses to climate change, emphasizing that gender equality and women’s empowerment must be incorporated into adaptation and mitigation policies and programs at the national and international levels.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Consider climate change in the context of the women, peace and security agenda. Through the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2122 (2013), the Security Council stated that it will increase the attention given to women and peace and security issues in all relevant thematic areas of work on its agenda, such as climate change. As women continue to bear a disproportionate burden to the impacts of climate change, as well as during conflict, it is crucial that they are active in designing and implementing mitigation and adaptation responses.

Empower women to respond to the impacts of climate change. It is crucial that we support and empower those most vulnerable to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Educating and empowering women and girls is central to finding sustainable solutions. We must dispel the myth that women are only victims of climate change, and provide them with the tools to implement climate solutions.

Implement gender-informed policies and increase women’s leadership in decision-making positions. As the primary providers of food, water, and energy for their households, women are already adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change. It is crucial that we harness this knowledge and integrate it into local, national, and international climate change treaties and decisions.

Recognize the contributions of rural women to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. As women remain the central providers of food, fuel, and water in rural communities, they remain acutely aware of techniques to adapt to climate change. It is crucial that we look deeper into what these women are doing on the front lines – to not only help them, but to learn from them; women’s knowledge is often undervalued, but it needs to be understood and shared.

Engage the private sector in responses to climate change in a gender-sensitive manner. The private sector is powerful, influential, and controls significant resources. They cannot be perceived solely as culprits of climate change, but they need to be tapped as a source for positive change. Protecting and empowering women is central to their bottom line.
This summary was prepared in partnership with the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.