

Gender and Climate Change: South Africa Case Study



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Study Background/Context

- The climate change discourse has engendered considerable international debates that have dominated the environmental agenda since the mid-1980s.
- Currently addressing the threat of climate change is a global priority.
- In the context of the significant attention to climate change at global level, debates regarding identification of gender perspectives and the involvement of women in addressing climate change have arisen

- It is believed that men and women will be differently vulnerable to climate change impacts due to existing inequalities such as, their role and position in society, access to resources and power relations that may affect the ability to respond to the effects of climate change (Commission on the Status of Women 2008; Carvajal et al. 2008; BRIDGE, 2008; WEDO 2007).



- Their basic needs such as food, water, health and energy which are mainly affected by climate change, are the basis of women's livelihoods.
- Though women may be the most vulnerable it has also been acknowledged that they function as agents of change in community natural resource management, innovation, farming and care giving. They therefore hold the key to adaptation to climate change (UNDP 2009).
- For such reasons, mainstreaming gender into climate change policies has become a matter of urgency.

With particular attention to South Africa as a case study, this study examines the interrelations between climate change and gender so as to make a contribution to the existing information gap on the gender differentiated impacts of climate change. In addition, the study hopes to create awareness amongst policy and decision-makers about the need for gender differentiated climate change policies. The study makes use of already experienced exposure to climate variability impacts (which are associated with climate change) to explore current gender differentiated impacts that are predicted to worsen due to climate change.

Country profile



- With regards to the physical environment, the country has rich varied natural resources and a climate that is mostly semiarid but subtropical along the east coast.
- Economically , South Africa has the continent's biggest economy, with strong financial and manufacturing sectors. It is a leading exporter of minerals and tourism is a key source of foreign exchange. Despite being economically successful, many South Africans remain poor with high unemployment rates and with approximately 57% of the population living below the poverty income (HSRC 2004).

- South Africa is located on the continent's southern tip with a population of 44.8 million. It shares borders with Namibia in the northwest, Zimbabwe and Botswana in the north, and Mozambique and Swaziland in the northeast.

Description of Study sites

The study was conducted in rural areas located in uMzinyathi and uMhlathuze district municipalities. UMzinyathi and UMhlathuze are among the various municipalities situated in Kwazulu-Natal. Kwazulu-Natal is a province of South Africa that forms the east coast of the country. It is South Africa's most populous province with a population of 9 426 017 million people. Apart from being South Africa's most populous province, KwaZulu-Natal has the biggest poverty gap of R18 billion with 61% of the population living in poverty (HSRC 2004).

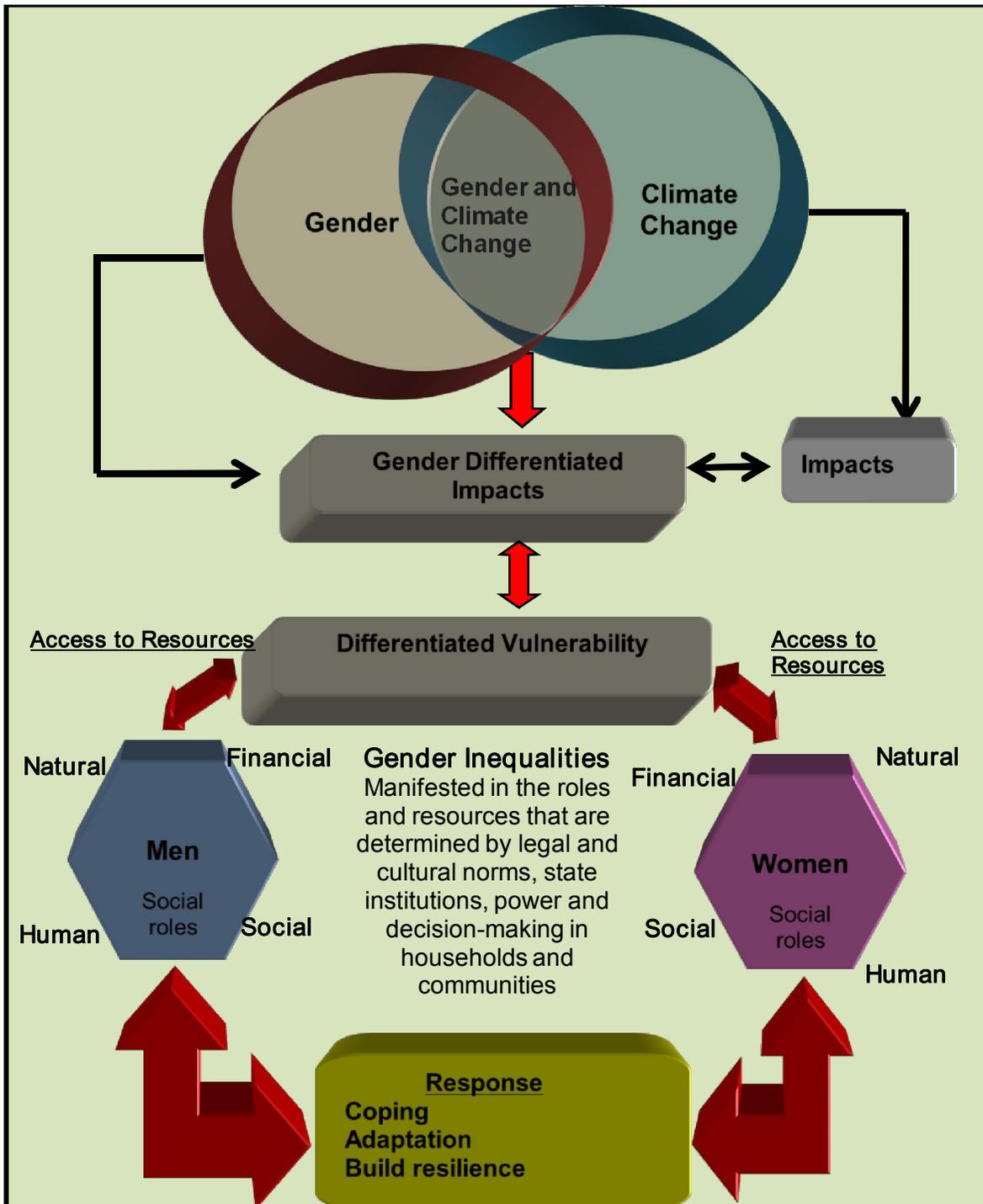
Underdeveloped, limited basic services, poverty, high levels of unemployment and low educational levels are some of the characteristics of the two rural communities in which the study was conducted. In terms of livelihoods, the rural communities rely mostly on agricultural activities. With regards to household structure, female headed households are the majority in both rural communities.



Description of Problem

- Decisions regarding climate change have neglected a gendered perspective, leading to gender-biased outcomes.
- Currently there is insufficient knowledge regarding gender differentiated impacts of climate change. As a result policy and decision-makers are not well informed about the need for gender differentiated policies.
- It has therefore become important to understand the interrelations between climate change and gender so as to design effective climate change policies that are responsive to gender.





Conceptual framework and Research Questions

- Are women and men differently impacted by Climate Change?
- How are women and men differently impacted?
- What are the physiological, political, economic and societal causes for the differences experienced, if any?
- What are the current coping and adaptation strategies and capacities?
- How can the capacity of women and men be strengthened to better adapt to climate change and climate variability?

Differentiated impacts

Gender differentiated impacts of climate variability were manifested in the unequal distribution of roles and responsibilities of men and women in both study areas.

Men

- Impacts are more psychological, resulting from feeling helpless.
- Stress due to unfavorable climate conditions leading to crops failure.
- Psychological impacts are further compounded by unemployment which hinders the men's ability to support and provide for the family in times of need.

Women

- Extra workload and longer working hours.
- Food security (ability to secure household food)
- seasonal work takes away time to socialize with their children.
- frustrated and anxious about where the food will come from when it is in short supply
- physically and emotionally drained
- Walk long distances in search of water
- Shift in gender roles to accommodate responses to the impacts of climate variability

Action: Gender differentiated coping and adaptation



Women seemed to have more diverse and creative means of coping with climatic events. E.g

- use of alternative food sources
- Livelihood diversification e.g. mobility of women and informal economic activities.

Men on the other hand tend to be more occupied with destructive coping mechanisms. These behaviours include mainly sexual relationships with multiple partners and alcohol consumption.

For both men and women there is also reliance on remittances, pensions and grants

Challenges

- ability to adapt and build resilience to climate variability and change is compromised by a combination of other underlying factors such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, governance, limited access to markets, credit, capital and inability to effectively implement programs and policies designed to enhance the lives of men and women.

Promoting Public Policy:

- Despite the momentum South Africa has gained regarding climate change, gender issues remain overlooked in climate change policies.
- Though not directed at climate change, South Africa has in place institutions and gender policies that have potential to address gender differentiated impacts and vulnerability to climate change.

What remains to be done

- Much more research is needed to fully understand gender differentiated impacts and vulnerabilities to climate change (taking into consideration progress made in addressing gender issues and social changes, lessons from positive experiences and issues that go beyond gender inequality)
- Women need not be seen just as victims but as members of society that can effect change.

Lessons: Among the many lessons learned, few are highlighted below

- Due to unequal distribution of roles and responsibilities, men and women are impacted differently by climate stressors.
- women are very knowledgeable about environmental changes.
- Women are more resilient and cope better with climatic stressors.
- Women's participation in decision-making is essential for effective climate change policies.