Why Fixing Climate Change Is Women’s Work

Yes! Magazine| 2903.2016

Natural resource scarcity and unpredictable weather affect women first, yet they’re often the last to be heard on how to combat it. That’s slowly changing.

Marla Smith-Nilson has completed more than 1,500 water sanitation projects as founder and executive director of Water1st International, but there’s a moment she still anticipates at the completion of each one.

At every ribbon-cutting ceremony for new groundwater wells, a woman from the community—whether in Bangladesh, Honduras, Ethiopia, or India—stands on stage with a large pot that has served as her companion during daily, mile-long treks to the river. Sometimes the woman is young. Sometimes she’s as old as 75. She raises the pot over her head and shouts “I will never carry this again!” before smashing it to the ground where it explodes into shards.

The community laughs as the pot shatters, but it’s the women in the crowd who feel the most relief. As primary caregivers, many women in poorer countries are responsible for trekking miles to collect water and fuel. When climate change depletes water, women notice first. Water is a climate change issue, and climate change is a women’s issue.
“Women are the first to be affected by climate change in every single country in the world,” said Yannick Glemarec, deputy executive director of United Nations Women, adding that women in so-called developing countries are hit the hardest.

As climate change puts pressure on natural resources, fresh water is becoming scarcer, food prices are increasing, and infectious illnesses like the Zika virus are on the rise. Worldwide, women tend to be poorer than their male counterparts and have less representation in policymaking. All this means they are the first to be affected by climate change and the last to be heard on how to combat it.

Smith-Nilson has spent 25 years working with so-called developing communities around the world and says her clients are already suffering from the effects of climate change. Many have always walked long distances to find water, but as sources dry up, those treks are becoming more difficult. Searching remote areas for fuel and water exposes them to greater risks of violence like rape or kidnapping.

Droughts, unpredictable rains, and saltwater intrusion on freshwater sources are slashing crop yields and driving up food prices. Since 1990, an area nearly the size of South Africa has been deforested, and drought has impacted 2 billion people, according to the U.N.

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Additionally, natural disasters catalyzed by climate change—such as landslides and tropical cyclones—impact women more than men. The destruction scatters communities, leaving women vulnerable and without social safety nets to protect them from organized traffickers.

Smith-Nilson recalls Mari Tuji of Ethiopia’s Kelecho Gerbi village. Tuji used to spend six hours every day hauling contaminated water from the community’s only drinking-water source. As her children fell sick from the water, she walked even farther to another village for medicine. The drugs were expensive and sometimes unavailable. This vicious cycle became Tuji’s daily routine.
However, the people most likely to be hurt by climate change are also the ones best positioned to fix it, Glemarec said.

U.N. Women operates several programs worldwide that increase women’s participation in policy talks and provide women entrepreneurs and farmers with access to financing, information, and time- and energy-saving technology. One such initiative in Mali provides women with solar- and gas-powered mills, freezers, and
lamps, which allow them to make products like syrup, jam, and juice to sell in the farming offseason. Efficient stoves also reduce the time Malian women spend gathering fuel.

Smith-Nilson says she has focused her work on ways to give women a voice. Women lead water councils, collect fees, and suggest repairs. They walk from house to house teaching their neighbors about hygiene. The women she works with may be shy initially, but they eventually feel excited to have a role in their water projects. After all, they are most affected by time loss and back pain from hauling water daily.

Giving women this power can be a challenge in male-dominated societies.

“I think it’s an issue we’ve been talking about for 30 years in the field but we have a long way to go in how you can involve women in projects,” Smith-Nilson said. “We can’t force women to be on water committees or force their husbands to let them on committees. We can convince them it’s in the women’s long term interest that they be involved.”

Water1st conducts role-playing exercises with men to show them how challenging it can be to care for a child while collecting water. It encourages men to share with peers the usefulness of having female voices on councils. Tuji—whose family was constantly sick from their river water—was involved on the water council when Water1st installed a well in her community.

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Women in wealthier nations may not experience the effects of climate change with the same immediacy, but they are similarly worried. A 2015 Pew research study found that while the concern over climate change is equal between genders in so-called developing countries, women in wealthier nations are more likely than their male counterparts to see climate change as a real and pressing personal threat. Correspondingly, European women use 22 percent less energy than men and are more likely to change their behavior to conserve energy.

There is good reason for this: In developed countries, women make an average of 79 cents for every dollar made by men. That means women—especially single mothers—may be more likely to feel the effects of increased food and energy prices. Eighty-four percent of single-parent households in the United States are headed by women, and 36 percent of those women live below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

And, similarly to their counterparts in poorer countries, women in developed countries are generally not in positions to be heard on climate change. Only 28 percent of environmental scientists and geoscientists are women, according to a 2014 Bureau of Labor and Statistics report. Globally, the United Nations reports that women make up only 20 percent of the renewable energy workforce, 4 percent of energy council chairs, and 18 percent of world energy council secretaries.
“We need to focus on women’s leadership development and building finance skills, policy skills, and how to move [women] to positions of power in government and business,” said Francesca Vietor, program director of environment, public policy, and civic engagement at The San Francisco Foundation.

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Vietor’s work at the foundation tries to help this development by supporting programs that provide clean energy tools and opportunities for frontline communities. The foundation is one of many funders that works with the Greenlining Institute and its partners in the SB 535 Coalition to ensure that money from California’s cap and trade program supports disadvantaged communities combating climate change. This money pays for projects like solar systems for residents, redesigned homes for energy efficiency, affordable housing near public transit centers, and large vans to help farmers carpool to work.

The program has also provided jobs in solar energy. Norma Alvarado is one of two females installing solar panels in a four-year apprenticeship program with the Fresno Ironworkers Union Local 155. She commutes past lawns of brown grass sizzling in the March heat. Air pollution causes many children to develop severe asthma, and Alvarado was no exception.

While Fresno and its residents are experiencing climate change first-hand, Alvarado sees how her work installing solar panels helps address the problems. “At first I didn’t see it that way,” she said. “Now that I’m participating in solar panel projects, I do feel like I have a part in solving the air pollution where before I didn’t feel like it.”

Though she was initially intimidated to be one of the few women in the field, she said she now feels accepted in the Ironworker’s “brotherhood.” Still, she said she’d like to see more women in the ranks.

“It’s important to have women in trades because it gives people a different perspective of what women can do, and I think a lot of guys doubt women and feel they can’t do a man’s job,” Alvarado said.

Clearly, there’s room for a shift in gender role perceptions as more women work to address climate change.

In Ethiopia, Tuji’s life has transformed since being relieved of the burden of hauling water six hours per day. After just a year with well water, Tuji’s family is no longer sick. She can now afford to invest in her farm with the money and time she has saved by not having to buy medicine or carry water for miles. When Smith-Nilson caught up with the family last year, Tuji introduced her new baby, Chala, which in the Oromo language means “the best.” She said it’s a reference to the best time of her life, after the well came to her community.
Mairi Tuji and her child Chala, which means "the best" in the Oromo language. The name represents the best time of her life—after the well came to her village. Photo courtesy of Water1st International.