

Reflections on Research Continued...

Gender, Climate Change, and Natural Disasters

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Nationally and internationally, the frequency of natural disasters is increasing. The massive earthquakes in Haiti and Chili reminds us all of our potential risk and vulnerability in the Pacific Northwest. The cumulative effect of hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters places a significant personal, material and economic strain on individuals, communities and the fiscal capacity of all levels of governments. In the past two decades, on average, more than 200 million people have been affected every year by disasters. The Hyogo Framework for Action explains that “a gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training.” There are important links to be made between gender, climate change and natural disasters.

Disasters affect women and men differently, and women are at greater risk due to gender inequalities. It is important to consider women’s experiences in order to inform theory, practice, and activism at local and global levels. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in the document titled “Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision” state that intersectional frameworks can open new spaces for transformation by examining not only the complex factors operating in women’s and men’s lives that keep them marginalized, but also how they are often able to respond to those forces in creative and innovative ways. An intersectional framework can consider a variety of perspectives, including stakeholder groups, and key intersections of geography, gender, poverty, age and others. The Gender and Disaster Network runs a website (www.gdnonline.org) that provides important resources and materials for all aspects of these intersections that affect disaster mitigation.

Based on original field research carried out in the Interior of British Columbia (BC) in Western Canada, the responses and adaptations of communities affected by the potential impacts of climate change and resultant disasters are being better understood and documented. The study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), examines the ability of small cities and rural communities to respond and adapt to climate change and disasters. New and innovative community-based approaches and actions demonstrate that local, grassroots communities are engaging local decision makers and municipal governments to implement practical ideas and solutions.

In the Canadian context, although warmer temperatures may be appealing, seemingly small changes in climate can have significant ecological, social, and economic consequences. For

example, slightly warmer temperatures have contributed to the devastating mountain pine beetle infestation in BC, which has destroyed more than 16 million hectares of pine forest. There are growing concerns about summer water shortages in the agriculturally-significant Okanagan region. Hotter, drier summers increase evaporation, drying the soil and ground-fuel materials. These conditions could pave the way for more forest fires. Besides destroying forests, fires can be financially costly. For example, in 2003, wildfires destroyed hundreds of homes in the Kamloops and Kelowna area. The total cost of fire fighting, rehabilitation and insurance claims approached \$500 million. For example, the Insurance Bureau of Canada estimates that in 2009 alone, Canadian insurers paid out 1.2 billion in weather-related claims, most the result of water damage. In 2008 the Government of Canada adopted a National Disaster Mitigation Strategy, outlining how disaster risk reductions can be achieved, to the benefit of individuals, communities and infrastructure. The goal of the Strategy is to protect lives and maintain resilient, sustainable communities by fostering disaster risk reduction as a way of life.

The results of the study demonstrate that many individuals and affected communities are actively engaged in adaptations at the community-level, in terms of addressing sustainable development, livelihood options, and human security issues. Participants involved in the study expressed an interest in accessing more information, and resources, to implement local strategies. At the same time, the impacts of climate change and resultant disasters affect men and women in different ways. For example, many of the women reported that their household responsibilities and childcare needs have increased dramatically since their male partners have out-migrated to seek work in other regions due to the economic impacts of a changing climate on work opportunities in their communities. Many women are actively engaged in contributing to livelihood adaptation strategies, such as making changes in purchases to support the local economy and food production, including community gardens and canning. What is particularly striking is that the impacts of climate change are felt and experienced differently in each community. Based on this analysis, it is imperative to consider the importance of ‘place’ in which individuals or groups experience the changes and the role of local strategies in adapting to climate change that provides valuable lessons.