

Environment and Sustainable Development

This Brief looks at the relationship between sustainable development, the environment and gender. In general, gender mainstreaming needs to approach this issue from two reciprocal standpoints: On the one hand, gender relations and the extent of gender equality can affect the environment. Conversely, the state of the environment can have disparate effects on men and women.

Linking Gender and the Environment

Like gender, environment is a “cross-cutting” issue. This means that environmental impact, like gender impact, should be assessed in the development of all public policy. Aspects of policy making that are important from a gender perspective are also important from an environmental perspective, for example:

- participatory decision-making and stakeholder involvement
- a re-evaluation of the criteria by which “good” policy is judged

I. SUSTAINABLE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT AND APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

see Gender Briefs on **MACROECONOMICS AND TRADE** and **GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION**

WHAT IS THE ISSUE? WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Some experts have argued that links between sustainable development and gender pertain primarily in traditional agrarian contexts and at the local level, while major (global) environmental threats have little connection with gender relations and equality.¹ However, this argument may partially stem from a lack of research and data on the links between gender equality and sustainable development at the global level.

For example, two of the main global environmental threats that face us today are the depletion of the ozone layer and climate change. Both of these threats stem largely from consumption and production patterns related to industrialization and the dominant processes of economic globalization.² Change requires re-examining the ways in which trade, industry, development and other economic policies are pursued. In this sense, global environmental threats are a question of macroeconomic policies and governance.

Other Gender Briefs in this series have demonstrated that enhancing attention to gender equality will bring greater accountability and focus on social justice. While more research is required to determine the precise nature of this link, it can be argued that greater gender equality in decision-making positions and the adoption of social justice criteria for macroeconomic policy will also enhance attention to sustainable development, including a sustainable global environment.

Furthermore, other major environmental threats, such as loss of biodiversity, can nonetheless be addressed at the local level. Because men and women often engage in different types of farming and land use, men and women hold different knowledge that can contribute to biodiversity. Research has also shown that different roles for men and women (e.g. cash crop farming vs. food preparation) means that they may have different preferences on plant and crop qualities, for instance.³

The **goal** regarding sustainable environment and development policy is therefore:

¹ See Martine and Villarreal, 1997

² Martine and Villarreal.

³ B. Woroniuk and J. Schalkwyk.

- closer **investigation** of the **links** between policy that promotes sustainable environmental development and policy that promotes gender equality; and
- using these links as the basis for **promoting** a more **sustainable development agenda**, in both human and environmental terms.

Progress towards the above goals can also be aided by:

- **promoting equal participation** of men and women in the highest environmental, macroeconomic and development policy-making positions.

WHY BOTHER?

Justice: Equal participation of men and women in environmental decision-making is a question of

equal rights and responsibilities: given the major impact that global environmental degradation will have on all people's lives and future generations, both women and men must share the right and responsibility of defining environmental priorities and developing environmentally sustainable development solutions.

Credibility and Accountability: While it would be questionable to assert that women are naturally more inclined than men to make decisions in favour of protecting the environment,⁴ a stronger presence of women in political decision-making is likely to bring more accountability and a broader perspective into decision-making processes. This can at least open up space within these processes for a more transparent and critical debate on sustainable environments to emerge.

MEASURING PROGRESS				
INDICATOR	Level of measurement	What does it measure?	What does it not measure?	Source of information
Male:Female ratio of top political positions for environmental decision-making (e.g. in Ministry of Environment, Environmental councils or similar)	National	Gender balance in decision-making positions	Commitment to or understanding of gender equality and environmental issues by either men or women in these positions	Survey
Male:Female ratio of activists in environmental NGOs	National	Disproportion may mean that a gender dimension is excluded from the environmental lobby agenda.		Survey

⁴ Some people suggest that women are naturally "closer to nature" (because of child-bearing and other "reproductive work" functions) and are therefore more likely to protect natural environments. However, as Martine and Villarreal (1997) point out, this is more likely an issue of "perception, rather than fact." Simply because societies *associate* women with "nature" does not mean they will behave in a sustainable way. This "biological determinist" approach also enforces the false "natural" division where men are responsible for production, while women are responsible for reproduction.

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS AND ENTRY POINTS

- **Researching the links:** As noted above, there is a lack of research that investigates the links between gender equality (particularly in governance and decision-making) and environmentally sustainable macroeconomic and development policies. Such research needs to be undertaken at both the global (comparative) and national levels.
- **Institutional analysis (“Who are the decision makers? What is their perspective?”):** A survey of decision-makers and their opinions can help trace links between a gender and sustainable development. A sociological survey (interviews) should be commissioned that specifically looks for and analyzes links between a pro-gender equality and pro-sustainability agenda.
- **Establishment of “Gender and Environment” working group:** An interministerial working group or commission could be established to “proof” all policy documents from a gender and environmental impact perspective. Policies in the areas of trade, economic development, income generation and health in particular may be targeted, as all of these policy areas have distinct gender and environment dimensions. This does not mean that the task of mainstreaming would fall to this group alone – all people at all levels should be responsible for mainstreaming. The role of this group would be to ensure that this has been done, and to assess the adequacy of these efforts.

II. GENDERED ROLES IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

WHAT IS THE ISSUE? WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Because men and women are likely to have different roles in the family, community and work force, they are likely to have different personal priorities when it comes to environmental protection at the local and community level. Men and women are also likely to have different interactions with the environment, which present each gender with

different opportunities to protect it. Moreover, it is likely that men and women adopt different strategies and are the sources of different types of knowledge regarding environmental protection.

Some examples of these differences include:⁵

- For women with double and triple roles as breadwinner, homemaker and community manager, time pressures may force them to adopt unsound environmental practices at the household level, e.g. in **disposing of waste and recycling**. Access to other “time saving” appliances may be viewed as a top priority for women, even though these may not make efficient use of natural resources.
- Traditional attitudes around masculinity may make men reluctant to adopt environmentally sound practices, for example, in terms of **motor vehicle use** (a car may be a status symbol in a man’s professional life).
- Because women often rely more on **public transportation** than men, they possess vital knowledge in terms of convenience of schedules and routes, which should be called upon when planning for public transportation.
- Women’s domestic responsibilities (e.g. procuring **fuel and water**) may mean that they adopt unsound environmental practices when these resources are scarce.
- Because women often play the role of “carer” or “healer” in the community, they may possess knowledge of environmentally sustainable practices, such as benefits derived from **medicinal plants** and other non-timber **forestry products**.

It is important to note that neither men nor women have a “natural predisposition” for environmental protection. Patterns regarding their roles in society may mean that strategies for promoting environmental protection at the local and community level need to target men and women differently.

The **goal** of gender mainstreaming in terms of environmental protection is therefore:

- when developing environmental policy, to call on and consider the **different positions and knowledge** of men and women in regard to the environment;

⁵ these examples have been in part adapted from Annex I of the OECD/DAC document “Reaching the Goals in the 21st Century: Gender Equality and the Environment”, prepared by Sida.

- to **disseminate information** about **environmental protection** to audiences in a way that recognizes **men’s and women’s different roles and priorities** in relation to the environment.

consideration the needs, priorities and perspectives of different groups of men and women) are more effective policies – which means more efficient use of resources needed to implement these policies.

WHY BOTHER?

Efficiency and Sustainability: Better targeted policies (i.e. those that specifically take into

Additionally, if policies are not targeted appropriately, they will not be effective, and the environment will not be adequately protected. This will ultimately harm environmental sustainability.

MEASURING PROGRESS				
INDICATOR	Level of measurement	What does it measure?	What does it not measure?	Source of information
Male:Female ratio of top-level environmental decision makers	National	Gender balance in decision-making positions	Awareness of or commitment to gender equality issues by either men or women	Survey
Male:Female levels of awareness of environmental problems, measured pre- and post-interventions (i.e. information campaigns, etc)*	National, regional, local (depends on intervention).	Differences in level of change between men and women indicate how well campaign targeted men and women		Sociological survey
* specific methodology will need to developed to ensure that such measurements can be repeated and compared over time.				

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS AND ENTRY POINTS

First, it is crucial to gather and analyze information that can help identify how and where to target environmental protection messages. Potential activities include:

- ➔ **Household surveys:** Sociological surveys at the household level can help policy makers identify different roles men and women play in the management of household resources that affect the environment. For example, the survey should include questions on waste disposal (who is responsible for waste disposal? What sorts of materials are reused and recycled?), family vehicle use, water use and conservation, energy and fuel use, etc..
- ➔ **Community and workplace surveys:** Similarly, surveys on environmental practices and priorities in the community and workplace can help identify different practices, viewpoints and needs of men and women.

➔ **Natural resources management policy review:** A comprehensive gender analysis should be undertaken which reviews policy and practice in areas of energy, solid waste disposal, water or other environment-related issues. The goal of such a review would be to identify ways in which such policy might impact men and women, given their different roles in the community. For example, if recycling points are located in remote areas only accessible by car, women, who may be responsible for waste disposal in the home, but who have little available time and no access to a vehicle, may have little motivation to recycle.

Once the different knowledge and situation of men and women is identified, potential strategies that might promote environmental protection include:

- ➔ **Targeted information campaigns:** Any good information campaign has a well-identified and targeted audience. Campaigns and other environmental awareness-raising measures

should be sure to target men and women according to their priorities and needs.

- ➔ **Provision of gender-sensitive alternatives:** If roles or responsibilities of men or women force them to adopt environmentally unsound practices, policies that promote alternatives should be sought.

III. THE GENDERED IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CLEAN-UP

WHAT IS THE ISSUE? WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Women and men are often differently affected by local and regional environmental degradation because the tasks and work patterns of women and men (in both the workforce and the household) are likely to differ. For instance, men often suffer more from exposure to environmental hazards related to their employment (e.g. driving to work, working in mining or other potentially hazardous industries, even participation in armed conflict), while women often suffer more from environmental hazards in the home environment (e.g. exposure to gas or wood-fire stove smoke).

Degradation can also lead to the implementation of environmental protection policies that can drastically affect livelihoods, and the effects are often different for men and women. For example, certain sectors of the work force have undergone radical change in order to protect fragile, abused or depleted natural environments. These sectors include:

- forestry
- mining
- fisheries
- agriculture

Many of these sectors are heavily dominated by male labourers, and apart from the obvious economic

crisis such change can bring, the psychological crisis wrought by loss of livelihood is not insignificant. This crisis can also influence the way that men view environmental protection overall, and may make them less responsive to environmental protection or clean-up policies in other spheres of their lives.

The **goals** of gender mainstreaming here are thus:

- to ensure that men and women are afforded **equal protection** from environmental hazards;
- in the context of environmental clean-up, to consider the **diverse needs of** and **effects on** men and women.

WHY BOTHER?

Justice and Credibility: Women and men have the right to equal protection from environmental pollution and degradation. Policy-makers need to ensure this equal protection not least as a human rights imperative. Furthermore, if governments only “partially protect” their population or remain indifferent to the needs of either men or women, their credibility is damaged.

Quality of Life and Efficiency: The health and economic consequences of pollution and environmental hazards on human beings has been well documented. These consequences also have strong links with chronic poverty. Apart from the major barrier this poses to quality of life of men, women and their families, this also has broader implications for the nation’s economic growth.

Furthermore, a strong case can be made for the fact that it is often cheaper to prevent pollution and environmental degradation than it is to clean it up afterwards. A gender mainstreaming approach can help to more precisely and accurately identify environmental hazards that affect men and women.

Chain reaction: Adopting a participatory approach to assessing environmental degradation (which includes making an effort to understand the needs and concerns of both men and women in terms of environmental clean-up programmes) will build trust and credibility, which in turn may elicit more commitment to environmental protection from the population in general.

MEASURING PROGRESS				
INDICATOR	Level of measurement	What does it measure?	What does it not measure?	Source of information
Male:Female ratio of DALYs* lost from environmental pollution and degradation	National	Can identify differential impact of degradation on men and women. Decrease in DALYs for one gender but not the other can indicate the lack of a gender perspective in policy.		Survey
Male:Female mortality rate from exposure to environmental hazards	National	Can identify differential impact of degradation on men and women. Decrease in mortality for one gender but not the other can indicate the lack of a gender perspective in policy.		Medical statistics
Male:Female ratio of jobs lost due to environmental degradation	National	Differential impact of environmental degradation on men's and women's livelihoods.		Survey
*DALYs – measurement of life years lost due to illness and disability				

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS AND ENTRY POINTS

- ➔ **Research:** Studies that assess environmental degradation often fail to note disparities in the effects of environmental degradation on men and women. Commissioning such research and analysis will help to clarify the extent and nature of these disparities.
- ➔ **Gender Impact Assessments of environmental policies and emergency environmental actions:** Before environmental protection and clean-up policies and programmes are

implemented, a gender impact assessment should be undertaken to identify how such actions will differently affect men and women. This is by no means asking environmental damage to be ignored because solutions may have a gender impact – quite the opposite. The objective is rather to research and analyze the impact of environmental protection actions, so that appropriate policies can be put in place that would minimize the negative effects to both men's and women's short-term livelihoods and welfare, while protecting the long-term sustainability of the environment.