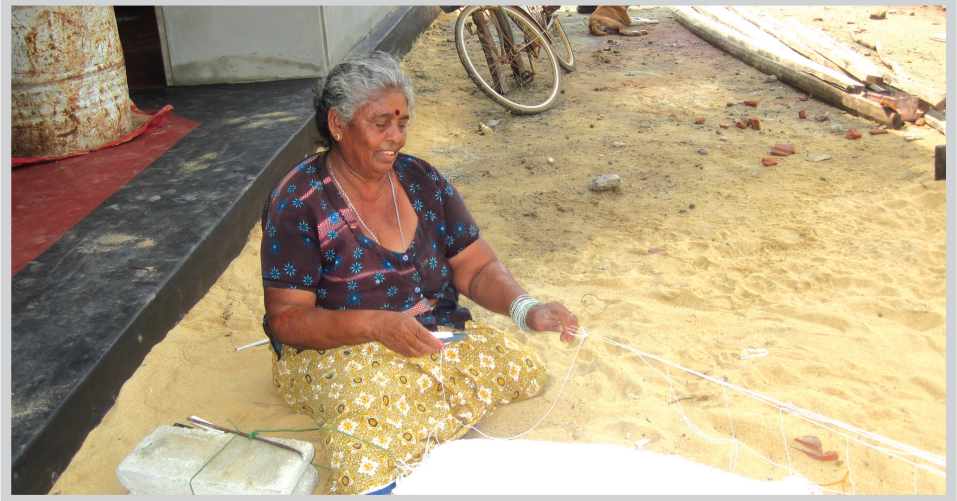
APWLD
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development

Climate Justice Briefs: Rural Women's Adaptation Strategies

Sri Lanka



"The most difficult part of life is finding drinking water. We have to walk three kilometers and need to carry pots on our heads. I know how to ride a bicycle, but my husband and neighbors don't accept a woman riding a bicycle…Five years ago we had more than enough water, but now there is no more here."

Pervasive gender discrimination and the need to promote collective adaptation efforts of small-scale Sri Lankan fisheries

Impact of climate change on small-scale fisherwomen

Small-scale fishing communities' existing exposure to poverty and dependence on natural resources make them among the most vulnerable groups in Sri Lanka. Further, there are numerous ways that traditional gender roles in this community exacerbate the burden of climate change on women and girls.

The majority women in these communities earn income from processing fish, repairing fishing nets, and to a more limited extent, harvesting fish. Climate change and associated increases in extreme weather, including variable rain patterns, storms, floods, and gales, deepen small-scale fisherwomen's social and economic vulnerability. Women noted overall increased workload, and worsening economic and family situations due to the worsening climate. They reported increased prevalence of vectorborne disease, skin disease, and reduced access to clean drinking water.

Flooding has damaged homes, and sea-level rise and intense coastal storms are blamed for the recent submersion of roads that connect area communities, leaving villages cut off from schools, healthcare, and markets. Women noted particular concern about lost marketing opportunities and lack of access to maternal healthcare. Further, existing barriers to girls' education are exacerbated when roads are impassable. Women agreed that submersion of roads was one of the most important issues in their community.

About the project

This 2011 participatory action research was conducted to document the impact of climate change in our communities, discuss how climate change exacerbates gender inequalities, and present our policy demands to promote meaningful change for women in our community.

Small-scale Sri Lankan fisherwomen from four villages in Puttalam and Kalmunai districts were part of the research team.

Flooding and drinking water salination disproportionately impact women due to traditional gender roles. Women are responsible for gathering drinking water and firewood, and are burdened with the physical toll of traveling further distances for these necessities.

Further, gender roles limit women's mobility and demand that even when floodwaters are high, women must wear traditional clothing. Respondents noted the cumbersome nature of this clothing in high water and extreme temperatures.

As fishing-related income becomes scarce due to extreme weather, women are burdened with finding outside income. Boys receive educational priority, and it is common or girls to stay home and care for younger siblings while their mother earns income elsewhere.

Climate Justice Briefs: Sri Lanka

Impact of climate change on Sri Lankan fisheries

- Increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather, altered rainfall and seasonal patterns
- Rising ocean temperature and associated migration or extinction of native fish species
- Loss of biodiversity as plants and animals struggle to adapt to new conditions of changed rainfall patterns, increased temperature, and extreme weather events

Local adaptation practices

Area women use locally-available resources to prevent water intrusion onto their land. For example, women report planting mangroves as a long-term adaptation strategy. During emergencies, women then use grasses, stones, or bags of trash to hold back encroaching water. There is a growing movement among these communities to petition the government for sandbags.

Barriers to adaptation

The biggest barriers to adaptation are limited knowledge among area women about climate change, poverty, and limited resources for adaptation. Further, there is a total lack of political mobilisation among village women. In general, social norms, practices, and attitudes reject women's political participation and community-level leadership. There is no meaningful societal recognition of women's role in resource management for fisheries. Institutionalised discrimi nation in the form of discriminatory land and title distribution further disenfranchise women and limit their ability to adapt to climate change.

Policy recommendations

There is a tremendous need for adaptation measures in the fisheries sector, with a pressing need for capacity building in fishing communities to ensure better protection from – and response to – coastal erosion, flood, and economic stress. Climate change education is needed in fishing communities, particularly for women, who bear a unique burden from climate change. Efforts should be made to empower women to mobilise into collective action, identify adaptation best practices, and scale up adaptation programs. Adaptation efforts should involve government and community actors, including local organisations such as churches.

The government should make an effort to promote sustainable small-scale fisheries and integrate strategies to promote adaptation practices that are both nondiscriminatory and responsive to women's unique vulnerabilities to climate change. The Sri Lankan government is responsible for upholding women's human rights, but has ignored pervasive gender discrimination and climate change's impact on social and economic conditions that disproportionately burden women. This includes access to healthcare, education, and clean water. Lawmakers and local leaders should ensure that women gain full access to means of income and production, benefits from adaptation, and participation as stakeholders in climate change action planning.

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