
Indigenous perspectives on gender, power and climate-related displacement

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Across the Greater Mekong subregion, Indigenous Peoples are employing a range of strategies to respond to the effects of climate change and climate-related displacement.

The impacts of climate change are most severely felt by those who live closest to their natural habitats. Indigenous Peoples in the Greater Mekong subregion of Southeast Asia are facing threats to their livelihoods and traditional ways of life, and are being forced to migrate as an adaptation strategy. Within these communities, women bear the brunt of the work to

adapt as they, culturally, are responsible for the food supply and livestock care.

In this context, the Climate Smart Women initiative¹ undertook village-level field research in selected Indigenous communities in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam to understand the gendered impacts of climate change at a community level and how communities are responding

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in order to adapt, share knowledge and build resilience. At a gathering in Bangkok in December 2019, Indigenous Women leaders, policymakers and civil society representatives from across the region met to exchange knowledge and build connections in response to this growing crisis.²

Gendered impacts

Pre-existing inequalities are exacerbated by climate change, resulting in differentiated vulnerabilities. To understand these impacts at a community level, research teams examined gender roles within the household and labour roles linked to livelihoods.

There was a range of experiences among the communities, particularly relating to women's literacy and participation. In communities in Laos, women's low level of literacy limited their ability to participate in decision-making forums. One respondent said, "...only men go to meetings and women stay at home. So, women do not know about climate change or adaptation." However, in Cambodia, women held more power within the households: "In Krang Teh village, women are always active in seeking advice from the local authority to deal with the drought situation and [one woman] also encouraged her husband to purchase a pumping machine to rescue her rice and other crops."

Although the whole family contributes to a household's livelihoods, there are distinct gender roles in the division of labour. Within agriculture, women are involved in more of the frontline work of planting, weeding and cultivating home gardens, which means they are the first to experience the consequences of unpredictable and extreme weather patterns. As they seek new ways to manage these resources they increasingly experience 'time poverty' because of the additional roles they also fulfil within the household related to care-giving and cooking. Men take on more physically demanding jobs – whether on their land, in the forest, or as hired labour – and are usually the first to leave in search of employment when resources are scarce as they do not have the same household obligations as women.

In Myanmar, one woman told us that when her husband migrated to Malaysia for better employment opportunities, she had to take on management of all the household activities such as agricultural production as well as managing the remittances sent by her husband. However, despite what might be seen as gains in gender equality, the status of women continues to be lower than that of men. Female-headed households remain in communities which do not recognise women as having the same status as men and consequently suffer as a result.

Many seasonal workers leave their villages with their entire families during the lean periods when there is no agricultural work. This has become so commonplace that people view it as a livelihood adaptation to climate change. However, in discussions during the conference, participants expressed concern over how migration is increasing the vulnerability of already marginalised people and increasing risks of gender-based violence for women.

Women interviewed in Laos also pointed to the differential impact of displacement for women. They observed how women do not have information on safe migration and are forced to migrate without passports and work permits, and are unsafe travelling alone; that women lack independence to travel for work; that disasters have destroyed their homes; and that they lack income and jobs in the community. And in the event of natural disasters such as cyclones, typhoons or floods, women's responsibility for children and elderly people may hinder their own escape, access to shelter or access to health care, as was seen when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008.

A question of power over land

Indigenous Peoples hold ancestral rights to their lands but these rights are not always recognised or protected, even when appropriate legislation exists. In Cambodia, a national policy provides strong direction towards respect for and recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and their role in the sustainable management of natural resources. However, threats from private

companies have pitted these rights against the interests of developers, resulting in rapid environmental degradation, deforestation and loss of land.

In Laos, land is allocated by the government but households are given smaller plots than their traditional farming practices require to produce sufficient food without resorting to herbicides. In other cases, land has been sold off to private companies. Some communities have been displaced by large hydroelectric projects and have been relocated to sites where they do not have access to land. But in the words of one activist, “Indigenous Peoples and forests cannot be separated; without forests, their lives will be gone.”

Knowledge sharing and other adaptation strategies

There is a wide diversity of views and perspectives within communities concerning the possibility of adaptation to climate change:

“Local villages feel hopeless and don’t know what to do about the future due to different weather. They don’t know how to solve these problems. Even myself, I don’t know how to deal with this, but I try to improve crop productivity.” (Indigenous Woman leader from Myanmar)

“When there is flooding, we know to move to high lands with our family so we can survive. Trees are one of the resources to protect us from flooding. We know which ones to cut and which ones to keep to prevent the effects of climate change.” (from report by Cambodian women)

Judging from the research done by the Climate Smart Women initiative, the selected communities in Cambodia appear to have employed successful adaptation strategies and are able to maintain their livelihoods without needing to leave their communities, in contrast to the communities in Laos and Myanmar. It is doubtlessly relevant that there is a stronger international NGO presence in Cambodia – INGOs of which the communities spoke favourably – than in Laos or Myanmar.

In Pu Chhorb village in Cambodia, for example, NGOs have supported climate change adaptation by working with local stakeholders (including networks of

Indigenous Women and of Indigenous Youth) to build a small reservoir to supply the village with water all year round, for household consumption as well as for irrigating home gardens. Similar experiences were found in Krang Teh in Cambodia where the NGO-led setting up of savings groups has contributed to the economic empowerment of Indigenous communities. Members are now more active in community business and enterprise groups; they have successfully implemented a model farmer and producer group, established agriculture cooperatives and farmers’ networks, supported irrigation systems, and built capacity for business management.

However, reliance on NGO intervention cannot be the first port of call in responding to the challenge of climate-related displacement. In Cambodia, Indigenous communities are saying that “We think we could access information better. We want the Cambodian government to have Indigenous representatives at all levels, especially on the disaster committee.”

In Myanmar, with the support of the UN Development Programme, local women-led civil society organisations known as ‘township leading groups’ were created to develop networks to support income-generation activities and capacity building for rural women, as well as to provide vocational training and awareness-raising workshops on trafficking and gender-based violence, health and nutrition. These individual village-level groups first gradually formed higher-level clusters for the sake of better coordination, then self-organised at the regional level, and finally created the country’s first national network of rural women – May Doe Kabar (National Network of Rural Women³) – to connect rural women across the country and to share their needs with donors, development actors and the government.

A culture of learning and knowledge sharing exists among Indigenous Women as they share with each other and pass on their knowledge of farming and adaptation practices from one generation to another. Within the 18 key messages and recommendations to emerge from the Climate Smart Women Connect conference

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in Bangkok in December 2019, half of them relate to knowledge sharing and exchange.⁴

One persistent challenge for local knowledge exchange is around language: there is a huge diversity of languages among Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia, not only between countries but within countries. Additionally, the reality is that much of the information around climate change, human rights and gender equality exists primarily in English.

One tool being used for knowledge exchange in Myanmar is the iWomen Inspiring Women app which was developed by MDK to enable rural women to have their voices heard through opinion polls, detailed surveys and storytelling. Rural women can gather evidence through the app on issues of concern such as gender-based violence or safe migration, which they can then share with other rural women, and with local and national government. As of May 2020, the app is being used by over 1,000 women across 31 different townships.

Recommendations for programming

Given the inter-generational nature of knowledge sharing between community members and the way in which whole families are involved in livelihood activities, any training or workshops on climate adaptation strategies or gender equality should take a **family-oriented approach**. This method was used in Laos as part of CARE's Remote Ethnic Women programme,⁵ where it was successful in starting to break down social norms and gender barriers.

Emerging from the research was a clear call for specific **capacity building for women** to increase literacy, leadership skills and local political participation. The example of MDK is a model of how local

village groups can evolve into national networks. However, women need the requisite skills to be able to participate.

The **role of external actors** should be limited to supporting community-led interventions, using their influence to build bridges with larger networks. In the Cambodian and Myanmar examples, it is clear that the technical assistance provided by development organisations has been helpful; however, often it needs more than just a technical intervention to shift gender norms – and it is the local people who have insight into what is needed in their communities.

A final recommendation is to **document traditional knowledge and practices** in order to preserve Indigenous knowledge and to influence policy. As one participant in Bangkok said:

"After attending the conference, I have realised that women in other countries also have the same challenges we have in Myanmar and I learned from them.... Therefore, we have to work together at a policy level on women's participation in climate change decision-making processes and [share information about] our challenges."

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1. This one-year project, implemented by Cuso International and Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact, was funded by Stockholm Environment Institute as part of their Strategic Collaboration fund and Global Affairs Canada Volunteer Cooperation Programme; the focus was on engaging with Indigenous Women in Southeast Asia for a more inclusive climate policy dialogue.
2. This was a joint research project and knowledge-sharing event convened by Cuso International and Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact. bit.ly/2Sxzdxu
3. Also known outside Myanmar as the Myanmar Rural Women's Network.
4. bit.ly/2HurOJd
5. See bit.ly/CARE-Laos-Remote



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