

Is the perception of climate change gendered?

Do women see both the risks and the solutions to climate change in a different way from men? This was one of the issues debated by a group of men and women from developed and developing countries during a day of side events on gender and climate change at CoP10 in Buenos Aires. Although hard and fast answers to this question are difficult to establish – as well as the question of whether any such difference is the result of nature or nurture – a number of ways in which women's attitudes tend to be different from men's could be observed.

First, cases were cited in which women had a risk perception which seemed to suggest that the threat was wider than the single event, for example in Bangladesh women linked the flood to difficulties in obtaining food and potable water, and protecting their assets. Not for them the big bang view of the disaster, but an approach which placed this extreme event within the context of their chronic day to day problems. Men in the same context, on the other hand tend to focus on impacts on longer term income and food security.

Secondly, within the discussions that took place, it was noticeable that many women present had less faith that the global and national solutions being proposed in the Kyoto process would, on their own, be sufficient. They looked in addition for a grounded approach that would explore in a participatory way, local community solutions and particularly solutions that involve behavioural change and structural change as well as technological innovation.

The doom scenarios which see environmental collapse on every corner from desertification through coastal erosion to ecosystem collapse were discussed. Several women professionals present, however, demonstrated optimism in their arguments, based on recognition that lifestyles could and would change, a view which perhaps relates to the ideology of the women's movement, that the personal is the political. It is an optimism that recognises that it is people (individually, and then collectively), rather than things, that power change.

The lack of representation of women's organisations in the whole Kyoto discussion process is quite noticeable, but this may reflect not so much lack of interest by women, as the fact that these discussions are so very narrowly focused on technological and market solutions. Few women would deny that technology and the market have an important role to play in mitigating climate change, but many would like to see a broader approach which recognises that people are at the centre. There are of course many other issues regarding gender and climate change apart from differences in women's and men's perceptions of the problem. Above all there is a need for differences in gender to be picked up and highlighted in any tools and instruments used to design and access interventions (both mitigation and adaptation). A detailed paper which makes recommendations related to this is currently being produced and will be made available on the UNFCCC website and on the Gender and Climate Change website www.gencc.interconnection.org.

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