

Women and Climate Change

By the Revd Canon Terrie Robinson, printed in The Episcopal New Yorker, spring 2018

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel 'Poisonwood Bible', a missionary travels overseas and settles in a village in 1950s Belgian Congo. To provide for his family's subsistence, the missionary creates a garden and begins planting seeds. A village woman observes him planting in flat beds of earth, and advises him to raise the soil in mounds. The missionary dismisses her advice.

Overnight, the village woman reshapes the garden, creating long piles of earth with channels separating them. The missionary responds by levelling the mounds of soil and replanting the seeds in flat ground. The seeds sprout and begin to grow, and are promptly washed away when the heavy rains come.

Dismissing the woman's indigenous wisdom was an arrogance and a mistake. It is certainly a mistake in these days of our climate crisis, to dismiss women's local and hard-earned experience, knowledge, and the competencies they have acquired out of necessity for mitigation and adaptation. It is also a serious omission when the specific needs of women and girls are not factored into national and international responses – and the churches' responses – to climate change.



Image courtesy of the Anglican Alliance

The environmental impacts of climate change are not gender neutral. A growing body of evidence shows that women are disproportionately affected by climate change. To a great extent, this is because women make up the majority of the world's economically poor. In some areas they do most of the agricultural work. Women often bear more responsibility for household food security, and carry the greater part of the burden for harvesting water and fuel for day to day survival. And more time spent on securing basic resources, means less time to secure an education or earn an income.

The lack of assets characteristic of so many women globally put them at a particular disadvantage. Following severe weather events and related disasters, they are usually at higher risk of being placed in unsafe, overcrowded shelters.¹ And bearing in mind the estimate that by 2050, there will be 250 million environmental refugees, it is likely that women will find it difficult to make the move and re-establish themselves and their families elsewhere. When changes in environmental conditions cause displacement or simply increase hardship, more

¹ UN Women Watch, 'Fact Sheet: Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change', 2009, <http://bit.ly/2pG4orK>

girls than boys drop out of school to help with domestic chores or to save money, or may be forced into early marriage in order to transfer the 'economic burden' they represent.²

UN Women Watch has pointed out that '[i]n the context of cyclones, floods and other disasters that require mobility, cultural constraints on women's movements may hinder their timely escape, access to shelter or access to health care.'³ It is estimated, for example, that 90 per cent of the 138,000 people killed in the 1991 cyclone that hit Bangladesh were women and children.⁴ In some areas of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, up to 80 per cent of those killed by the 2004 tsunami were women.⁵

But women aren't just victims of climate change; they are also powerful agents of change. It is therefore gratifying to see that in its 'Agreed Conclusions', the recent session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women urges Governments at all levels, and invites civil society - including faith-based organizations, to 'develop and adopt gender-responsive strategies on mitigation and adaptation to climate change to support the resilience and adaptive capacities of women and girls to respond to the adverse impacts of climate change, through, inter alia, the promotion of their health and well-being, as well as access to sustainable livelihoods, and the provision of adequate resources to ensure women's full participation in decision-making at all levels on environmental issues, in particular on strategies and policies related to the adverse impacts of climate change, and ensuring the integration of their specific needs into humanitarian responses to natural disasters, into the planning, delivery and monitoring of disaster risk reduction policies and into sustainable natural resources management'.⁶

The great mistake of our kind has been to see our own flourishing as something separate from the flourishing of the planet we inhabit with all its ecosystems, creatures and plants. Yet God's handiwork is a tapestry of interwoven complexity. And that complexity means that every person, every woman and man has something of great value to gain and to contribute as we respond to our ever more urgent calling to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

² Ian Davis *et al*, 'Tsunami, Gender and Recovery', 2005, <http://www.gdnonline.org/resources/tsunami%20-genderandrecovery.pdf>

³ UN Women Watch, 2009

⁴ Hanna Schmuck, Report from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2002

⁵ Oxfam Briefing Note, 'The tsunami's impact on women', March 2005

⁶ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw62-2018>