

## Gender, development and sustainability

Men and women play different roles and have differing degrees of power in societies, and this affects their access to and control of resources and opportunities, as well as their relative vulnerability. Yet despite extensive research on gender in the context of sustainable development, gender issues are often neglected or poorly addressed in development policy and practice. Many interventions fail to recognize gender differences, while others oversimplify or fall back on stereotypes.

SEI's work on gender aims to narrow this gap between knowledge and policy and practice, both by exploring specific gender issues, and by explicitly addressing gender differences across a broad range of environment- and development-focused studies. Below we present key insights from this work, as well as key activities. We end by charting a path for new research on gender in multiple contexts: from political ecology, to the "green economy".

### Key insights

- *Unequal power relations, formal and informal, are the key drivers of women's disproportionate vulnerability to environmental degradation, climate change and disasters. Policy interventions need to address these inequalities.*

Women and girls are commonly described as particularly vulnerable, but SEI's research clearly shows that, where this is true, it is due to social constraints, power imbalances, and unequal access and rights to key resources and economic opportunities. For example, among smallholders in Nigeria, cultural and political barriers limit women's access to land and to climate change

knowledge, and this has resulted in male-headed households being likelier to engage in adaptation than female-headed households (Yila and Resurrección 2013).

Research in rural Nicaragua has found that men have greater control over land and livestock, which also gives them greater access to credit; they also have non-farm work opportunities. All together, these factors give men greater capacity to adapt to increasing drought (Segnestam 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, SEI's work has found that women commonly have less access to agricultural inputs and tools than men, and they often do not control – much less formally own – the land they cultivate. Unequal property rights, combined with social constraints on women's mobility and activities, also constrain female farmers' access to extension services and to markets (Farnworth et al. 2013).

Notably, these inequalities have persisted despite laws that give women most, if not all, the same rights as men. Customary law (in parts of Africa) and cultural norms, including the gendered allocation of livelihood activities, all disadvantage women. For example, a forthcoming SEI study shows Batwa women in forest communities in Rwanda depend more on subsistence agriculture, livestock and fruit production than men do, and thus are more vulnerable to climate change impacts such as a prolonged dry season, strong winds and floods.

- *Gender is only one of several factors that determine women's vulnerability to climate change and other environmental stresses, their resilience, and their adaptive capacity.*

SEI work has highlighted how stereotypes of women (as chronically vulnerable, victims, and/or natural stewards of the environment) pervade debates about climate change and sustainable development (Resurrección 2013). While women's advocates often find these stereotypes useful, they ignore real-world complexities, risk saddling women with the burden of "environmental mess-cleaning", and ignore key differences among women.

For example, SEI work in Central Vietnam has found distinct age and class differences in the impact of agricultural water scarcity on rural women. Well-off, younger and married women are able to take loans and collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to compensate for their reduced farm productivity, while poorer women from female-headed households have fewer options (Huynh and Resurrección 2014).

Similarly, an SEI study in southeast Cameroon (Bharwani et al., forthcoming) finds that better-off women collect high-value NTFPs, while poor women do not. This is either due to a lack of information, or because they cannot afford the potential income that would be lost from agriculture, their most valued activity. This difference is exacerbated by increasing difficulties accessing NTFPs, which can be a good safety net but are found ever deeper in the forest, as the land is becoming less productive and dry periods are becoming longer. This requires women to camp for a few days away from home to collect NTFPs, taking more time away from agricultural activities.



A woman carries firewood in Somotillo, in northwestern Nicaragua.

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The indirect impact of male activities reducing those traditional options available to women is interesting and will be one focal area of SEI's future research on gender.

A review of gender, climate change adaptation, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) prepared by SEI for the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) echoes these findings. It shows how gender intersects with other factors to shape hierarchies and create both disadvantages and privileges, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability (Carson et al. 2013).

- ***Gender-blind environmental and development policies and programmes will often disadvantage women, and may exacerbate gender disparities.***

In the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project, where women play a major role in fisheries, action plans and key project outputs remain gender-blind (Brugere 2014). SEI research shows that overcoming gender inequalities would require deliberate action, starting with high-level commitment to gender equality and the consideration of gender-sensitive actions and cross-cutting issues covering communication, gender-disaggregated data collection and governance, backed by adequate budgets. SEI research in Myanmar has found similar shortcomings; planners generally advocate gender equality, but this is noticeably absent in DRR programmes. There is limited participation and representation of women in disaster committees, and programme outputs do not typically include gender-disaggregated disaster data, risk profiles, and assessments (Thomalla et al. 2013).

In Nicaragua, drought management policies have not recognized vulnerability differences between different social groups – least of all, between women and men. This may lead to inadequate engagement with women, reducing their coping and adaptive capacity relative to men, and thus widening the gender gap (Segnestam 2014). In sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural development programmes that do not explicitly target women have tended to benefit mostly men (Farnworth et al. 2013).

Sanitation is a field where gender-blindness has been particularly harmful. In many countries, cultural taboos about hygiene

and menstruation already create severe difficulties for women and girls. Personal safety can also be a concern. Yet a study in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, found that men dominate the sanitation sector, particularly as engineers, and they tend to neglect the needs of women and girls (Ekane et al. 2013; Kjellén et al. 2012).

To address this problem, a recent demonstration project on integrated sanitation solutions has highlighted responses to gender-specific needs, particularly around menstruation hygiene. This was found to help girls to stay in a school in Bihar, India (Andersson 2014).

Still, “mainstreaming” gender in environment and development activities may be more difficult at larger scales. For example, a study in the Mekong region found that women's participation and attention to gender thinned out as organizations scaled up their political engagement with regional environment issues (Resurrección and Nguyen 2014). Gender-focused organizations, meanwhile, paid little attention to environmental issues.

- ***Gender inequality is a multi-faceted problem and needs to be addressed on multiple levels: from households, to communities, to development programmes, to national laws.***

One of SEI's largest gender-focused projects in recent years grew out of an evaluation of Sida's gender programmes in rural Africa coordinated by the Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative (SIANI), hosted by SEI. The work included multiple case studies, and culminated in a book, *Transforming Gender Relations in Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Farnworth et al. 2013).

A key finding of the research was that gender inequality cannot be solved simply by changing the law – though this is crucial – nor by any other narrowly focused approach. Instead, it is crucial to combine multiple approaches to overcome the full range of barriers to women's success in agriculture: from household- and community-level interventions, to programmes that help women access value chains, to data-gathering, to institutional changes. Without a multi-faceted approach, gender-focused interventions are likely to have limited impact.



A woman tosses fish out to dry on Ngapali Beach, on the Bay of Bengal, in western Myanmar.



## Other major activities

SEI staff are active in gender debates across a wide range of policy and academic forums, speaking extensively on these issues at major international and regional events, and convening panels on gender, for example, at both the 2012 and 2014 Asia-Pacific Climate Change Adaptation Forums.

SEI is also increasingly exploring gender issues as part of larger studies on environment and development issues. For instance, a major study of transportation in sub-Saharan Africa examined differences between men's and women's transport needs and practices (Haq and Schwela 2012). It found that women often used public transport and non-motorized vehicles and made trips with multiple short segments, often to complete caring and domestic tasks. Men travelled longer distances and were far likelier to own private vehicles. Taking women's transport needs seriously in policy and planning, the study concluded, would lead to a shift away from heavy reliance on private cars and to lower-carbon, less-polluting options.

SEI research on urban design and green spaces has also explored gender differences. For example, studies in Scotland have found urban green spaces help buffer stress and anxiety for low-income people in inner cities. While both men and women benefit from increased green space, the benefits for women are greater; women living in areas with little green space showed more severe symptoms of chronic stress and exhaustion (Roe et al. 2013).

Women's perspectives and experiences are of particular interest in SEI's growing body of research on household energy. Traditional biomass cooking not only exposes women and children to smoke that harms their health, but also often requires them to spend long hours collecting fuel, exposing them to injury and to physical attacks. However, clean cookstove programmes often have low success rates. SEI's work challenges technology-based approaches that develop and disseminate clean cookstoves without first engaging in depth with the target users. SEI's work has instead stressed the need to learn from users, who know best how they cook, collect and use different fuels, etc. (see Atteridge 2013, as well as SEI's new Initiative on Behaviour and Choice).

## New research and future pathways

Gender-focused research is a growing field at SEI. Below we identify new and emerging areas of inquiry that we expect to pursue in the coming years.

**New, reinvigorated gender frameworks:** Gender analysis tools and techniques have been weakened by policy simplifications and bureaucratized gender mainstreaming. We expect to continue to pull the discourse away from simplistic, stereotyping approaches and towards more complex approaches grounded in feminist theory, and look at gender on multiple scales and in multiple contexts. For example, it is important to examine the gender-differentiated implications of economic reform programmes that favour market-led approaches to natural resource governance. Developing new, cutting-edge gender analysis and nuancing planning approaches that address the complexity of gender and power in adapting to environmental and economic changes may lead to more effective policies and strategies.

**Gender and water resources:** Ongoing research in Southeast Asia explores how climate change adaptation and new vulnerabilities are being experienced in gender-related ways, with a particular focus on intensifying water stresses in peri-urban areas

in Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. Similarly, ongoing SEI work on water productivity and the need to reduce water-related conflicts in the Andes region is exploring community-based benefit-sharing and coordination mechanisms that take gender into consideration, among other factors.

**Gender, resilience, and disaster risk reduction:** Gender is an important aspect of SEI's growing body of work on disaster risk reduction and resilience, reflecting the recognition that research and DRR programmes need to be more gender-conscious and socially transformative. Otherwise, as briefly discussed above, disaster and climate-related programs may actually exacerbate some women's vulnerability.

**Women and the "green economy":** Both climate and development-focused debates increasingly highlight the "green economy" as the path forward for a prosperous and sustainable future. Women's place on this path, however, has barely been discussed. "Green jobs" such as waste and water management, for instance, are traditionally located in the informal sector, where huge numbers of women work. We need to know more about how gender-specific employment norms and practices may shape women's inclusion in and rewards from green jobs. Potential gendered markets for eco-friendly products are also little explored, as is the question of whether and how purchasing power is gender-equitable among different social groups. Women also rarely have seats in corporate boards and top-level management positions, giving them little input in shaping a just and equitable "green political economy".



An emergency evacuation drill in Central Vietnam, part of a programme to build resilience in coastal communities.

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Men and women work together to build terraces on a farm in Uganda.

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