

Environment and Gender Equality

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development.



1. Introduction

Irish Aid recognises that 'sustainable development is only attainable when the needs and interests of both men and women are fully recognised'.¹

Gender inequality primarily affects women: they experience poverty differently from men because they are denied equal rights and opportunities, lack access to resources and services and are excluded from important decisions that affect their lives and development.' (IA Gender Equality Policy, pp. 7)

Gender inequality remains pervasive worldwide and is a key factor in the persistence of poverty. Gender inequality negatively affects women more than men, and due to their resulting unequal status in society, women are disproportionately affected by poverty. There are huge inequalities between men and women's control of, access to and benefit from natural resources. These disparities between men and women adversely affect the quality of life for society as a whole, hinder development and impede poverty reduction.

A full understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty and of the inequalities which determine women's disadvantaged position in society is necessary if the rights and needs of women and men are to be met equally and sustainable development is to be achieved. Approaches, which address these inequalities by empowering women and achieving gender equality, should be central to strategies to reduce poverty.

Gender Equality matters to Environment because:

- > Women perform two thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property.
- > Women are more reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods than men as they do not have equitable access to alternatives such as wage labour and the security and benefits these provide.
- > Degraded environments mean that women have to walk further to collect water and fuel wood. As a result their access to education and other productive activities may be curtailed and they will be exposed to the risk of gender based violence in isolated areas
- > Women have less control of and access to land and natural resources than men – in many cases women are excluded from formal ownership of land.
- > Due to their socially constructed roles and existing inequalities, women are more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental and natural disasters such as drought, floods and cyclones than men.
- > Women are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse and other forms of violence in times of vulnerability and need. This risk increases at times of disaster.

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development. Key strategies for implementing the policy are i) mainstreaming, where the environment is recognised as a critical part of sustainable development and is taken into account in all policies, programmes, activities and funding decisions; and ii) partnership, where Irish Aid works with national governments, multilateral organisations, international agencies and civil society organisations to contribute to sustainable development.

The first step in environment mainstreaming is to have an understanding of how the environment is linked to the development challenge or sector YOU are responsible for. The aim of this Key Sheet is to provide preliminary information on why consideration of the environment is critical to gender equality, and vice versa, and to indicate where to go to find additional information. As environmental sustainability and gender equality are both cross-cutting issues and development objectives in their own right, mainstreaming strategies provide opportunities to enhance synergies between them and to find common approaches to ensuring both issues are addressed in poverty reduction policies and plans.

¹ Report of the Ireland Aid Review Committee, pg 41, February 2002, quoted in the Irish Aid Policy for Gender Equality, 2004.





Firewood distribution in a camp for Rwandan refugees. Photo: Chris Sattlberger/Panos

2. Women, Environment and Development

Poor men and women are increasingly recognised as caretakers of the environment². Women are particularly reliant on the environment to meet their basic needs and play an essential role as managers (i.e. use and control) of natural resources. Women are responsible for reproduction and production in the household and for water and energy needs, placing them in direct contact with the natural environment on a daily basis. Women therefore rely more heavily on natural resources than men as they have fewer alternative sources of livelihood. Men can migrate to urban centres to look for work and diversify into labouring or small business, while women often must remain at home to fulfil responsibilities such as caring for the family, sick and elderly. They rely on the resources available to them locally to fulfil these needs. They tend to grow crops and keep small animals for consumption and rarely engage in cash cropping or market orientated production as they are too occupied meeting day to day needs.

'Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families'.

Wangari Maathai – Nobel Lecture, Oslo, December 10, 2004

Although women are highly reliant on their local environment for their livelihoods, they frequently lack ownership and decision-making power over the natural resources on which they depend. These factors limit women's potential to climb out of poverty, makes them very vulnerable to environmental change or degradation, and increases and perpetuates inequality.

3. Environmental change and gender equality

Population growth, changing climatic conditions and increasing pressure on resources leads to environmental degradation. The result is scarcity of resources and declining resource quality with knock-on effects on livelihoods. Water and fuel

² World Resources 2005. The wealth of the Poor: Managing ecosystems to fight poverty. Online at <http://population.wri.org/worldresources2005-pub-4073.html>

wood are vital natural resources and their collection and use in the household is largely the responsibility of women and girls.

As water supplies and other natural resources become depleted due to over-exploitation, the amount of time and energy women and girls spend on household duties dramatically increases. Women have to travel further to collect water and fuel, requiring much of their valuable time. Girls may be taken out of school to assist with these tasks and because they cannot complete their education their future prospects are limited. Venturing into isolated areas in search of resources may also expose them to the added risk of gender based violence and it's resulting consequences.

According to the World Health Organisation, the daily energy requirement to carry water may consume one third of a woman's calorie intake. Environmental degradation entrenches the disadvantaged position of women and girls in relation to men as they have less time and less energy for other productive activities, and gender stereotypical roles and inequality are perpetuated.

Exposure to industrial and agricultural chemicals and organic pollutants through daily farming has a profound impact on women's health; it affects their reproductive health, leading to complications in childbirth and pregnancy. This further incapacitates them, increasing their difficulties in securing their livelihood and in participating in development processes. Urbanisation as a result of environmental degradation also has disproportionately negative effects on women. Due to their caring and domestic roles, they are exposed more readily to chemicals and pollutants found in water sources in cities. Over-crowding in slums results in the added risk of air and smoke pollution from fires within small dwellings. Minimal security of these dwellings means their safety and health is compromised, placing them at risk of Gender Based Violence.

4. Access to decision-making and representation

A related knock-on effect of environmental degradation is that women have less time for participation in community affairs and are often not consulted on key environmental programmes and plans. Women should be equally involved in designing and managing water and sanitation facilities and other communal natural resources.

For example, as the main users of wells and water pumps, women should have real input into the location of water points and in their management. Both women and men can be trained in the maintenance of pumps and given equal responsibility for collecting and managing water use fees. While household hygiene tends to be the responsibility of women, training men as well as women in this role ensures that both women and men understand and take responsibility for the links between sanitation and safe drinking water and the protection of their own and their families' health.

Care should always be taken to ensure that gender stereotypical roles are not reinforced, that women's work burden is not increased and that the benefits of and responsibility for water management is enjoyed equally by men and women.

The importance of adequate sanitation facilities in increasing girls' attendance at school is well documented (see below).

Ethiopian teenage girls hardest hit by lack of latrines

A study in Benishangul Gumuz, a remote region of Ethiopia, has shown that teenage girls were hit the hardest by a lack of decent school sanitation. In these areas only 4% of the population has access to sanitation. Many schools had no toilets and in others, students had to share one latrine between 325 other pupils. Some girls interviewed said that they could not be seen to go to a latrine in their school, especially on menstruation days. Many go home and do not return, and many more drop out of school completely. Many pupils said they were unable to be clean and hygienic as they didn't have water in their schools either.

Source: WaterAid, Ethiopia 30 Aug 2005

Failure to take into account women's perspectives and their interaction with the environment can lead to policies that further marginalise women and even criminalise their behaviour. Policies to protect against deforestation are an example of this, where local communities are refused permission to use forests to produce charcoal, which is often a vital component of income generating and livelihood strategies for women during lean periods.

In poor communities wood or dung is collected as fuel by women and burned for cooking, warming water and as a source of heat. Women are frequently blamed for deforestation due to their fuel wood collecting activities while more often than not it is the cutting of wood for construction materials and for sale (primarily male activities) that is the primary cause.

Women tend to collect dead wood which burns more easily; they only cut green wood if they have no alternative.

By drawing women and men into environmental management and understanding their different needs and perspectives, policies can be developed that meet the needs of entire communities without compromising the sustainability of the resource base.

Women particularly need specific and official channels of support to ensure that they can access and participate in decision-making related to the environment and must be involved in management on a burden-sharing basis with men.

Environmental Sound Technologies (ESTs) are being introduced to reduce energy demands and safeguard health. Improved stoves burn fuel more efficiently and require less fuel. This has benefits for women as it reduces the amount of fuel wood they need to collect and it reduces the amount of smoke released, thereby reducing indoor pollution and respiratory disease. Women's voices must be taken into account when designing stoves, as in the past stoves were designed which did not take traditional foods and cooking practices into account and as a result were not adopted by women despite their energy saving potential.

5. Control over and access to resources

Access to resources is a critical factor affecting poverty reduction and income generation. Poor men and women tend to have very insecure access to natural resources despite their reliance on them for their livelihoods. Redistribution of land by government, resettlement and the sale of traditionally held lands to commercial enterprises can leave poor men and women landless or reliant on more marginal lands. Tenure security encourages farmers to invest in their land through soil conservation, fertilisation and irrigation and it can help them to access credit using the land as collateral. However, women traditionally do not have access to technical inputs and advise that increase productivity and some actors may erroneously not consider them to be 'farmers' or to be economically active. The World Bank estimates that if women in sub-Saharan Africa had equal access to agricultural inputs, the total agricultural output for the region could increase by up to 20 percent³.

³ Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals, Gender and Development Group, World Bank, April 2003.

The issues of access to and control over resources affects men and women differently. In most societies, land is traditionally the property of men and is handed down from father to son. In many cases women cannot own or inherit land, even if they are responsible for tilling the land and growing crops. This can mean that women do not have rights to the income derived from the crops they have grown and it poses serious problems if a woman's husband dies and his family inherits the land, leaving her and her children destitute. Women may also not have a say in how the land is used and what use is made of crops despite their role in producing these crops. Many African countries are engaged in land certification schemes where governments are giving farmers use rights to their land. Donor agencies are working with governments to ensure that husbands and wives co-sign land use certificates and that the use rights can be inherited by and assigned to women.

Changing land use rights in Ethiopia⁴

Regional governments in Ethiopia, including Tigray where Irish Aid is active, are currently writing and implementing new land laws which aim to increase tenure security for farmers. Land certificates assign use rights to farmers for the land they have traditionally cultivated but which is officially state land. In most cases the legislation requires that both the husband and wife sign the land use certificate to signify their joint rights. In addition, women headed households can receive a certificate in the woman's name and women can inherit certificates on the death of their husband. Careful monitoring will be needed to ensure that the certificates work as planned and protect the rights of poor men and women to their land.

As land and resource use laws change, women need to be informed of their new rights. Agencies need to remember that women may be unable to attend public meetings on these issues for social reasons or be unable to travel due to family responsibilities. This lack of exposure to information and the high levels of illiteracy among women mean that they tend to be less well informed about their rights than men. There is also a tendency among aid agencies to assume that men will pass on the information to their wives, which may not always be the case. Initiatives to educate women and men about their rights must be tailored around the daily roles and responsibilities of men and women, and where necessary, tailored to facilitate women's participation.

Defending women's land rights in Kenya

The Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA) is supported by Irish Aid to provide free advice to women on their land rights. Individual women can bring their cases to FIDA and receive legal support to fight their case. In addition, FIDA is working closely with the government to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed into the new land policy which is being developed through a consultative and collaborative process.

Poor men and women are highly dependant on Common Property Resources (CPRs) such as forests, pastureland, fishing grounds and wetlands for their livelihoods. These commonly owned resources provide poor men and women with wild foods (particularly important as a coping strategy during food shortages) medicinal plants and construction materials. CPRs are managed by traditional, socially accepted rules, which may or may not ensure equity of access and sustainable use (matriarchal versus patriarchal systems). When these rules break down due to pressures from population growth and development, resources can become scarce and degraded. Women are especially dependent on CPRs as they often don't have access to formally recognised farming lands. As CPRs become degraded or are converted to other uses (e.g. wetlands reclaimed for intensive farming, forests cleared for roads) women lose a valuable source of food and income.

6. Vulnerability and environmental security

Poor households are vulnerable to environmental shocks, including drought, floods, cyclones and outbreaks of disease. Women headed households tend to be the most vulnerable in a community, and are at a greater disadvantage when disaster strikes. Women tend to have less diversified opportunities for income generation than men and are wholly reliant on the natural resource base pre and post disaster. In situations of mass population movement, such as displaced and refugee settings, women are often wrongly blamed for destruction of their new surroundings as they continue to collect wood and other resources for their family's survival. Aid organisations must be encouraged to address the gendered responsibilities of members of these populations by assisting men and women to find environmentally sound ways to meet their requirements

Women are also more likely to have fewer assets than men, especially physical assets that can be sold in times of stress. Limited access to credit and market-based activities mean that

⁴ Ongoing work as part of the Irish Aid-Ethiopia Operational Research Programme in SNNPR and Tigray regions.

women have limited opportunities to reduce their vulnerability to natural shocks such as drought, land degradation and flooding.

Vulnerability to flooding in Mozambique

Poor men and women cultivate land in high risk, fertile flood plains along the coast in Mozambique. The floodplains are a common property resource and are accessible to women who do not own their own land. The 2000 and 2001 floods meant many men and women lost their lives and their livelihoods as they refused to heed warnings to evacuate. Women in particular did not leave, as they feared they would lose their claim to their land and their crops. When the floods receded they returned to cultivate the same areas even though they had been resettled elsewhere. This is because they had limited access to land near their new homes and the land in the floodplains was more fertile.

Environmental disasters are not gender neutral⁵. Women and children are particularly affected by disasters, accounting for more than seventy five percent of displaced persons. In addition to the general effects of natural disasters and lack of health care, women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems, and increased rates of sexual and domestic violence⁶ which require specific response interventions. Women's vulnerability increases when they lose their husbands and are forced to provide for their families on their own and struggle for recognition in patriarchal systems. In addition, women are the primary carers of those affected by disasters, increasing their emotional and physical workload.

Women worst affected by cyclones in Bangladesh

Women suffered most following the cyclone and floods in Bangladesh in 1991. Among women aged 20-44 the death rate was 71 per 1000, compared to 15 per 1000 for men. Women were left at home by their husbands to care for children and protect property and needed to have permission from their husbands to evacuate. In addition, saris restricted their movement and women were weaker than men due to malnutrition. Finally, the lack of facilities and privacy in cyclone shelters dissuaded women from using them.⁷

5 BRIDGE, Environment Policies and Gender Equality.

6 For more information see 'Gender Based Violence; a failure to protect. A Challenge to Action'. Joint Consortium of Irish Human Rights, Humanitarian and Development Agencies and Development Cooperation Ireland. 2005. Online at <http://www.dci.gov.ie/uploads/Gender%20Based%20Violence%20st%20udy.pdf>

7 See BRIDGE report number 26: Background Paper on Gender Issues in Bangladesh, S. Baden, A.M> Goetz, C. Green and M. Guhathakurta. ODA, August 2004.

7. Positive actions to maximise links between environment and gender

There are many opportunities in the Irish Aid programme to address the linkages between environment and gender equality. Both issues are addressed through mainstreaming training and are further elaborated in the Irish Aid mainstreaming strategy.

To be effective, strategies to decrease poverty and preserve the environment need to take into account the disparities between men and women's access to resources and livelihood opportunities.⁸

Opportunities to mainstream environment and gender equality and to enhance synergies between them include the following:

- > Raise awareness of the impact of environmental degradation and environmental risk on women's livelihoods, health and safety.
- > Ensure women and men are equally involved in decision making for environmental policy and planning.
- > Identify opportunities to mainstream environment and gender equality in Poverty Reduction Papers (PRSPs) and Country Strategy Papers (CSPs), sector strategies and area-based programmes.
- > Identify win-win activities for environment and gender equality e.g. natural resources managed equally by men and women in communities; livelihood diversification to meet men's and women's needs; support strategies to empower women to engage equally with men in decision making related to the environment and natural resources.
- > Promote and support women's rights to access, use and ownership of land and other natural resources.
- > Improve women's access to credit so that they can diversify their income generating activities and reduce their dependency on natural resources.
- > Support research into understanding the coping strategies of poor women and men and identifying ways to protect the natural resources on which they depend in times of stress.
- > Ensure gender sensitive approaches are used in responding to natural disasters and in post-conflict and recovery situations.
- > Ensure that agricultural extension services take account of gender roles and responsibilities in target communities and tailor appropriate training and inputs at both women and men.
- > Identify opportunities to provide specific support to address inequalities in the way that natural resources are used, owned and managed by men and women.

8 Poverty-Environment Gender Linkages. OECD – DAC, 2001.

References and useful websites

Gender Equality Policy, Development Cooperation Ireland, September 2004.
<http://www.dci.gov.ie/Uploads/Gender%20Equality%20Policy.pdf>

Gender Based Violence; a failure to protect - A Challenge to Action. Joint Consortium of Irish Human Rights, Humanitarian and Development Agencies and Development Cooperation Ireland. 2005. <http://www.dci.gov.ie/uploads/Gender%20Based%20Violence%20study.pdf>

BRIDGE - Development and Gender
<http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/>

Environment Policies and Gender Equality BRIDGE
<http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/dgb1.html>

Global Development Research Centre – Gender and environment resources
<http://www.gdrc.org/gender/gender-envi.html>

Food and Agriculture Organisation – gender and food security / environment
<http://www.fao.org/Gender/en/env-e.htm>

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)
Gender issues are addressed under Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity and Livelihoods and Forestry and Land Use. www.iied.org

Gender and Health in Disasters, World Health Organisation, July 2002
http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
<http://www.awid.org/index.php>

Gender and Disaster Network (GDN)
http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/gdn/

Women, Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development. UNISDR 2002
<http://www.unisdr.org/eng/risk-reduction/gender/Women,%20disaster%20reduction%20and%20SD.pdf>

Worldwide Fund for Nature. Research and activities in the area of Population, Health and Environment.
http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/policy/people_environment/pop_health_environment/index.cfm

Irish Aid Environment Policy for Sustainable Development
http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/development_environment.asp.htm

Irish Aid mainstreaming Strategy
<http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/uploads/mainstreaming%20strategy%20final%202007.doc>