

WOMEN ARE KEY TO CONSERVATION

In early December, nations met for another round of climate talks in Cancún, Mexico, where a joint initiative was launched to make women more integral to the process known by the acronym REDD, which aims to compensate developing countries for protecting forests. NEWSWEEK's Katie Baker and Tania Barnes spoke with noted Indian economist Bina Agarwal on how women are central to global conservation efforts. Excerpts:

How are women in India and other developing countries susceptible to climate change?

Climate change is likely to adversely affect the poor in many ways, including threatening their livelihoods, food security, water supplies, and health. Women in poor households are especially vulnerable on all these counts, with few resources for adaptation. On food production, for instance, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are expected to be especially hard hit. Here women's livelihoods could be markedly threatened, since they are much more dependent on agriculture than men, who have shifted in larger proportions to nonfarm jobs. Also, in India women often eat last and least, and their nutrition and that of breast-fed children could be affected severely under food scarcity.

How can empowering local women help address environmental problems such as deforestation?

Rural women depend on forests and local commons for many items of daily use, such as firewood and fodder. About 65 percent of rural households in India



and 90 percent in Nepal use firewood as the main cooking fuel, and most of it is gathered. Hence the costs of deforestation are borne especially by women. They thus have the most to gain from forest regeneration, but they also have to extract firewood, without which they cannot cook. This means that they face conflicting choices between immediate and future needs. Therein lies the complexity. Here women would feel empowered if they had access to alternative sources of clean cooking fuel as well as greater say in forest use.

Why should leaders who study green governance pay attention to gender?

Given their differential dependence on ecosystems, men and women often

have divergent interests and preferences in a resource and bring different skills and knowledge to green governance. Hence, when economists assess the costs of environmental degradation or climate change, or people's "willingness to pay" for conservation, or design policies for reviving biodiversity, they are likely to get quite different results depending on whether they focus on men or women.

Moreover, conservation outcomes can differ significantly depending on the gender composition of forest-management groups. I found that groups which had a larger percentage of women in their executive committees showed substantially greater improvement in forest condition. And all-women groups outperformed groups with men, even though they began with more degraded forests.

India has election quotas for women in local leadership positions. Have you seen an emphasis on green issues from women elected to positions of power?

I have seen rather little emphasis on, say, local forests or clean cooking energy. A lack of clean fuel is a major problem facing most rural women in India. Studies show that women's mortality risk from smoke-related infections is 50 percent higher than men's, due to air pollution caused by smoky fuels in poorly ventilated kitchens. Although nonconventional energy is within the purview of village councils, I have seen little evidence of women council heads actively promoting it. This is a puzzle, but part of the answer could lie in the hesitation many women councilors express in taking up what are considered "women's issues," and cooking energy is seen as a women's issue.

Even the major political parties said rather little about green issues in their 2009 election manifestoes. I hope this will be rectified long before our next general election in 2014.