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Women on the Front Lines: Why Gender Matters in Confronting Global Environmental Challenges

Wednesday, July 14, 2010, 10:45 am-12:15 pm

Facilitator:

Terry Odendahl, CEO, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)

Panelists:

Cate Owren, Program Director, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)

Shalini Nataraj, Vice-President of Programs, Global Fund for Women



Sponsors:

Arcus Foundation; Global Greengrants Fund; Global Fund for Women

Cate Owren opened the session by screening an Oxfam International video, 'Sisters on the Planet', which illustrates climate change as a gender issue. The video highlights the effects of dry land and lack of drinking water on women in Uganda and the actions taken by women-led groups in the face of severe flooding in Bangladesh.

Shalini Nataraj shared examples of how women are particularly impacted by environmental degradation. Women are often responsible for gathering firewood, water, and preparing the food. The presence of a drought severely impacts women's lives, as walking further for water renders women more vulnerable to sexual assault. It also increases their medical risk from carrying heavy loads for long distances. Additionally, as women need to traverse more land, they may cross village or caste boundaries. Despite these challenges, women globally are organizing on to confront climate change.

Ms. Owren shared with participants her journey to working with these issues, starting with her experience living in a small village in West Africa ten years prior. As water was scarce in the dry season, water was stored in bins, which attracted mosquitoes and led to many cases of malaria. Pregnant women were the most vulnerable to infection. She also shared the story of a young female friend whose responsibility to collect water prevented her from attending school. These experiences brought Ms. Owren to the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), an organization that focuses on addressing the intersectionality of issues affecting women.

Terry Odendahl then asked participants to break into small groups to discuss challenges to integrating gender and environmental work. A few key points emerged:

- Many grantmakers in the group do fund at this intersection, but much of the environmental movement is male-led and it is difficult to find women-led groups.
- Expertise is often siloed, staff are either knowledgeable in gender or the environment.

Ms. Owren argued that climate change is a social justice, human rights and women's issue, but that it hasn't been framed as such. There currently is a shift in thinking and now is the time for increased focus on connecting the dots. As the climate change worsens, women continue to be victims. For example, 26% of adult women live on less than \$1/day (11% less than men). Women comprise at least 50% of the global refugee population, which reached an all-time high in 2009. Women are 75% of the 876 million illiterate adults in the world and women own only 2% of the world's land.

Climate change is exacerbating cycles of poverty. Droughts and floods result in less crops, which increase the work burden of women, causing women and girls to drop out of school, decreasing the literacy rate. Unsustainable coping mechanisms such as migration or deforestation leads to increased environmental instability.

Governments are not connecting gender equality, human rights, and sustainable development. The appropriate entry points lie within the framework of the convention on climate change, which is the only major international agreement internationally. At the end of 2008, there was no discussion of human rights or gender in climate change negotiations. WEDO launched a serious advocacy campaign and in April 2009, 43 governments submitted gender text into negotiations.

Ms. Nataraj provided examples of the harm caused by neglecting to use a gender lens. For example, when water and land is removed from community use and control, the promised alternate means of livelihood usually target men, leaving women without access to resources. The effect of funding biodiversity without taking into account the knowledge women have, could be a loss of their stature and status in the community. Forty percent more women die in natural disasters than men because they do not control assets. Even if they survive, they have nothing to rebuild with as relief often goes directly to men. One example is that in regions affected by the 2004 tsunami, women dress in saris and burqas which slow their movement in obtaining supplies. Women are also more likely to be unable to swim and are thus more likely to die. Movement into camps also may increase gender-based violence. Those that are stigmatized prior to a disaster due to gender, ethnicity, disability will be even more marginalized afterwards.

Questions and Answers:

Q: In the past year there has been an increase in the migration of women in relation to climate change. Has funding increased in response?

A: One example is the launch of a new climate fund at Global Greengrants Fund (GGF). Research on the topic of female migration and climate change would be a great area to fund. The upcoming Global Forum on Migration and Displacement will explore integrating a gender lens into a treaty related to these issues.

Q: What are your experiences with the safety of grantees working at the intersection of gender and the environment? How do you work together?

A: GGF is starting to work with the Urgent Action Fund (UAF) and Global Fund for Women (GFW) and has included grants for safety as a budget line item. GGF does not consider itself a rapid response or disaster funder, but in past year we have done this 3 times for the earthquake in Chile, the political emergency in Honduras, and tsunamis.

Q: Our environment program does not have a gender lens, it focuses on sustainability in biodiversity hot spots and the preservation of local culture. With recently introducing a gender lens at GGF, have you had to stop funding any grantees?

A: We are working with advisors around the world to better understand grantmaking with a gender lens and half of these advisors are women. We do expect our grantmaking will change.

A participant shared an example in which a Grantmakers without Borders' member donor constructed a well for a village and returned a year later to find it unused. In trying to understand the reason for this he found that the culture was very patriarchal and that the journey to get water was one chance women had to speak with each other without supervision. The absence of a well was actually supporting women's solidarity.

The session concluded with the speakers emphasizing that women are showing tremendous agency in work at the intersection of gender and the environment and are at the forefront of positive change. Their voices need to be heard in the global policymaking arenas. There is a need for these stories of innovation and success to be compiled and shared with policymakers. Funders can adopt a gender lens within their own grantmaking and support this work through long-term core support.