



IPCS Briefing

Reconsidering the Role of Women in Climate Change Adaptation in Somaliland: Challenges and Prospects

Najma Ismail Abdi

Executive Summary

Climate change poses a significant threat to developing countries, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. Women and girls face a disproportionate part of these challenges due to unique vulnerabilities including cultural norms, low socio-economic status, and political barriers that limit their coping capacity. Women are involved in domestic work and play key roles in fetching water, firewood, and forest products, which can lead to increased workloads and poverty. Most of this work and responsibility are time-consuming and difficult in task, which puts a burden on women. For example, fetching water especially during drought periods is often disrupted by climate change. Women in Somaliland therefore, are not only vulnerable to climate conditions, but they are also effective actors in climate change adaptation. They have extensive knowledge of the environment and resource conservation, which can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction, and adaptation strategies. The women of Somaliland have been using traditional water harvesting techniques to store water during droughts. They have also been involved in planting trees to help prevent soil erosion and conserve the environment.

Moreover, understanding Somaliland's social structures is important. Socially constructed roles and responsibilities often make women more vulnerable than men, limiting their access to education, decision-making, power, and opportunities to engage in climate change adaptation efforts. This is why it is important to integrate a gender perspective into climate change mitigation and adaptation policies and strategies. Policy and decision-makers, organizations, and other stakeholders must prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment in climate change adaptation efforts by taking a comprehensive and intersectional approach. Government institutions and development agencies should also prioritize women's access to resources such as education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities for climate change adaptation. They

should also conduct gender-disaggregated data collection to understand women's vulnerabilities and needs and address gender-specific impacts of climate change.

Introduction

Climate change is a growing threat, especially in developing countries. It has a more severe impact on arid and semi-arid regions, and women are disproportionately affected¹ by the scarcity of natural resources. They are often responsible for collecting water, firewood, and other resources, and as these resources become scarcer, their workload increases. This can lead to poverty and an increased vulnerability to violence². Women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change adaptation than men. This is because women make up the majority of the world's population and are more dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Climate change, therefore, threatens these resources, and women have fewer resources to cope with the resulting challenges³.

Somaliland is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This manifests in extreme weather events such as prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, disrupted monsoon seasons, and cyclones such as Sagar⁴. About 40 percent of Somaliland's gross domestic product is based on agriculture, with livestock production traditionally centered on a nomadic, pastoralist way of life⁵. Climate shocks create resource scarcity and stress on livelihoods, which can lead to tension and conflict in households. Additionally, women are often marginalized. During natural crises women are considered to have low coping capacity, lack of skills, knowledge as well as inadequate resources. This puts them at even greater risk of being victims of disasters, and their role in disaster response is often overlooked. While women are disproportionately affected by climate change, they are more likely to be displaced, face gender-based violence, and have difficulty accessing food and water. These challenges exacerbate the

fact that women often have less access to resources and opportunities than men in the wider Somali context⁶.

Furthermore, gender inequality in Somaliland existed before the climate crisis. Women and girls were traditionally confined to the domestic sphere and had less power in the economic, educational and political spheres. This made them more vulnerable to the trials of the climate crisis, such as displacement, food insecurity, and gender-based violence. When a disaster hits, women are more likely to be displaced and become breadwinners. They may take up work as street vendors, keep and sell goats, or take up casual work in urban centers. Statistically, women (and children) are more likely to die during disasters than men⁷.

For women, the issue is all the more critical. Cultural norms already limit women's access to resources and their cultural rights, and climate change can worsen these inequities. While women are thus among the most vulnerable to climate change, they are often also the first responders in their communities, working to protect their families, traditions and ways of life from the negative effects of climate change. For this reason, women are often the catalysts for climate change activism and respond to the needs of their communities as initiators, supporters and activators.

For women, it seems obvious that they are both vulnerable to climate change and are effective agents of change. They have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction, and adaptation strategies. They are also stewards of natural and household resources, and they have extensive knowledge of the environment and resource conservation. However, socially constructed roles and responsibilities usually make women more vulnerable and marginalized than men. Though the attitude toward women is changing in recent times, in particular, in them attending schools and joining the education sectors; the traditional gender roles can still limit women's access to decision-making power, and opportunities to participate in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. In more recent times, women are active and play a crucial role in addressing the effects of climate shocks.

This policy briefing presents practical solutions to empower women and promote gender equality in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts in Somaliland. The paper highlights, the importance of integrating a gender perspective into climate change policies and strategies. By understanding the specific vulnerabilities, knowledge, and capacities of women, we can ensure that climate action is more effective, equitable, and sustainable.

Furthermore, the paper underlines the importance of including women in decision-making and policy-making processes related to climate change since they experience a disproportionate part of climate shocks. Women's voices and expertise, are indeed, essential for shaping effective climate policies and initiatives. By promoting gender-responsive governance and fostering women's leadership in climate action, we can foster more inclusive and impactful outcomes in addressing the climate crisis. Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment as integral components of climate change strategies. By doing so, we can build a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

The Role of Women in Climate Change Adaptation

Women play an important role in both addressing the impacts of climate change and implementing adaptation strategies during and after climate crises. They have unique knowledge and traditional skills about climate patterns, agricultural practices, and natural resource management. Their intimate connection with the local environment allows them to recognize subtle changes and adjust their livelihood strategies accordingly. Women's knowledge can enhance the resilience of their communities, by providing insights into sustainable resource management activities such as water management, soil conservation, and reforestation. Of course, women are essential actors in adapting to changing climatic conditions⁸. However, the nature of the community and its social construction usually put women in a disadvantageous position for preparing for climate change effects, and they face challenges and barriers during climate change adaptation efforts, including limited access to resources, unequal power relations, and cultural norms that restrict their participation⁹.

When the climate shock hits, women in the household, make required adaptation efforts to survive their families. They migrate to look for shelter and working activities, they become breadwinners by both keeping and selling goats, working as street vendors in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), or taking up casual work in urban centers. This means that women and girls are at the forefront of the challenges as climate change aggravates vulnerabilities and disasters making to communities. Their traditional domestic duties and livelihood activities are made even more difficult. Moreover, women's reliance on agriculture and natural resources for their unpaid production and care activities makes them particularly vulnerable to climate fluctuations. For example, women must travel longer distances, invest more time, and expose themselves to an increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV) just to meet their livelihood and care

roles and responsibilities.

Women are increasingly seen as more vulnerable to climate change impacts due to limited access to resources like land ownership, credit, agricultural inputs, decision and policy-making structures, technology, training, and extension services. This vulnerability has both social, economic, as well as cultural dimensions. Despite this, women can also be active agents and promoters of adaptation and mitigation measures. Their historical knowledge and skills in water harvesting, food preservation, and natural resource management can contribute to enhancing local adaptive capacity and sustaining community's livelihood¹⁰.

In addition to that, women are actively engaged in agricultural activities and are responsible for food production and household food security. They contribute significantly to the adoption of agriculture practices such as conservation farming, crop diversification, and water harvesting techniques. By promoting sustainable agriculture, women help enhance food production, mitigate climate risks, and ensure the availability of nutritious food for their families. Besides this, women are responsible for collecting firewood, which is becoming increasingly scarce due to deforestation and changing climate conditions. In recent times, women often employ sustainable practices such as tree planting and fuel-efficient stoves to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change on local ecosystems¹¹.

In Somaliland, women also play a crucial role in water management, income generation, and community leadership to adapt to climate change stresses. Women, for example, collect water for domestic use, use local conservation techniques, and diversify income sources. Therefore, women's entrepreneurial skills and resourcefulness contribute to building adaptive capacity and economic empowerment. Women also advocate for gender-specific vulnerabilities and priorities by disseminating climate information and advocating for gender-responsive climate policies and programs. Therefore, women's organizations and networks in Somaliland work towards creating an enabling environment that supports women's participation in leadership, and access to resources in climate change adaptation initiatives.

Of course, women can actively participate in community-based organizations, community-based groups, and cooperatives that promote sustainable natural resource management, reforestation, and climate-resilient infrastructure¹². Therefore, women's involvement in community-based organizations can influence policy decisions related to climate adaptation at local, regional, and national levels. It is crucial to take part in gender-responsive policies

and strategies for climate change adaptation. Empowering women as agents of change fosters social cohesion and enhances community resilience in the face of climate challenges. Recognizing and empowering women as key stakeholders in climate change adaptation is essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring the well-being of communities in Somaliland and beyond while reducing vulnerability to climate change impacts. Moreover, women are also uniquely positioned to lead the way in climate change adaptation. They have a deep understanding of the challenges facing their communities, and they have a wealth of traditional knowledge that can be used to develop effective adaptation strategies.

Why are women victims of climate change rather than agents of change?

Somaliland is located in a region where people are most vulnerable to climate change and climate variability, which occur at various levels and are coupled with a low adaptive capacity among the population. The existing major climate-related hazards in Somaliland are droughts and extreme flooding events, which more substantially affect poor people's lives directly through their livelihoods, reductions in crop yields, or destruction of homes, and indirectly through increased food prices while food becomes insecure, etc. In Somaliland, a region already grappling with poverty, political instability, and limited resources, the effects of climate change further exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

The disproportionate impacts of climate change on women at its core is manifested in the socially constructed gender roles. In Somali society, particularly in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas, women and girls are assigned roles and responsibilities that make them more vulnerable to the impacts of changing climate conditions and have severely affected agricultural productivity, which leads to crop failures, livestock losses, and loss of income opportunities. Women are indeed, heavily reliant on agriculture and livestock rearing for their livelihoods, particularly those heading households, are at risk of gender-based violence caused by displacement, resource scarcity, and competition over diminishing resources. Within this important section of society, the women and girls, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and forced marriages, as they seek alternative livelihoods or migrate due to climate-related pressures¹³.

Similarly, women face health risks due to the spread of vector-borne diseases and waterborne illnesses such as malaria, cholera, and diarrhea. They face educational barriers during disasters, and girls drop

out of all forms of education. Moreover, women often have limited access to decision-making processes and are excluded from discussions on climate change adaptation strategies, lessening their impact. Excludes and hampers the effectiveness and sustainability of climate change initiatives. Women's active participation and leadership in decision-making processes are, therefore, crucial for the development and implementation of gender-responsive climate policies and programs. Such vulnerabilities exacerbate the marginalization of women and hinder their ability to adapt to and cope with the impacts of climate change.

The fact remains, that there is a clear dividing line in the challenges that climate change poses for women, and these challenges are interconnected and have significant impacts on various aspects of their lives, including their livelihoods, health, education, and overall well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and intersectional approach that integrates gender equality, social justice, and climate action. Of course, there is a need for a consideration which involves and empowers women, recognizing their roles as agents of change, and to ensure their active participation in decision-making processes. Additionally, there is a need to implement gender-responsive policies and programs that prioritize women's access to resources, education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities. This at minimum is vital to promoting resilience and in enabling women to extend their impact on climate change challenges.

Challenges to Women's Climate Change Adaptation

Lack of access to resources, gender discrimination, and cultural norms discourses strike at the heart of the discussions with the members of the local community. Women often have limited access to land ownership, water, and other resources that are essential for climate change adaptation. This can make it difficult for women to cope with the effects of climate change, such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather events. For example, women may not have the same rights to land acquisition as men, or they may not have access to credit or other financial resources. In addition, the role of women in decision and policy-making is limited or in reality absent. This also limits their ability to influence climate change adaptation policies. Including women in these discussions, can give them a chance to have a say in how climate change adaptation programs are designed and implemented. Their exclusion from such opportunities greatly affects the robustness of the outcome of any policies and strategies designed and implemented.

Cultural norms remain a factor that influence women's role in Somali society in general. This limits women's ability to participate in climate change adaptation activities. For example, women may be discouraged from participating in public meetings or taking on leadership roles. This can prevent them from sharing their knowledge and experiences and contributing to the development of effective adaptation strategies.

Concluding remarks and the way ahead

This briefing, provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of women in climate change adaptation in Somaliland and the challenges women face. Equally important, the paper highlights the importance of integrating a gender perspective into climate change policies and strategies, empowering women as agents of change, and ensuring their active participation in decision and policy-making processes. By recognizing and addressing the gender-specific impacts of climate change, implementing gender-responsive policies and programs, and promoting women's leadership, Somaliland can enhance its resilience to climate change and achieve more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Policy and decision-makers, organizations, and stakeholders must prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment in climate change adaptation efforts. By taking a comprehensive and intersectional approach, Somaliland can effectively address the challenges faced by women and harness their knowledge and resilience to build a climate-resilient future.

This briefing, therefore, proposes policy options and strategies that can be applied to the challenges facing women from social, economic, and political perspectives. The implementation of these policies and strategies requires firm leadership and a clear strategic vision; therefore, the stakeholders of this issue are expected to:

1. Ensure access to resources to ensure that women have access to land title deeds, water, and other resources that are essential for climate change adaptation. This can be done by providing women with land titles, access to credit, as well as training on how to use resources sustainably.
2. The Government must develop and implement gender-responsive policies and programs that prioritize women's access to resources, education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities. These initiatives should address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women in climate change adaptation. The Government should prioritize the needs of women, and these need to be reflected in development planning and funding.
3. Furthermore, women should be part of the decision and policy-making processes at

- national and local levels regarding the allocation of resources for climate change initiatives.
4. Promote gender equality in decision and policy-making processes so that women can have a greater say in climate change adaptation policies. This can be done by ensuring that women are represented in decision-making bodies.
 5. Women should be provided with the training and skills they need for own empowerment as agents of change by promoting their active participation and leadership in decision-making processes related to climate change at all levels.
 6. Spaces must be created for women's voices to be heard and their expertise to be recognized and valued in shaping climate policies, projects, and initiatives.
 7. Challenge to cultural norms that limit women's participation in climate change adaptation activities must be normalized and part of the decision-making discourse. This can be done by raising awareness of the public underlining the role and importance of women in the community, in particular, climate change adaptation, and by providing women with the support they need to overcome cultural barriers.
 8. The capacity and knowledge of women must be built, and also knowledge-sharing platforms created, to enhance women's skills and knowledge sharing capabilities in climate change adaptations. This can include training on sustainable farming techniques, water management, disaster preparedness, and other relevant areas. The government should also promote education and awareness of climate change in all sectors of the community this can help challenge gender stereotypes, promote behavioral change, and foster a culture of gender equality.
 9. Financial support for women in their bid to have access to financial resources in climate change adaptation efforts should be extended. This can be achieved through the provision of microfinance programs, grants, and loans targeted at women-led initiatives.
 10. Furthermore, and very importantly, research and data collection practices are crucial. Universities and other stakeholders should conduct a thorough analysis and studies regarding the gender-disaggregated data on climate change, its impacts and adaptation strategies within Somaliland. This can provide a better understanding of the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women, inform evidence-based policies, and contribute to more effective climate change adaptation. It should be identified and addressed in areas related to gender-specific impacts of climate change, particularly in areas related to water, food security, agriculture, energy, health, disaster management, and conflict. Moreover, gender issues associated with climate change adaptation, such as inequalities in access to resources, including credit, extension and training services, information, and technology, must be taken into greater consideration.

Endnotes

- 1 MacGregor, S. (2010). 'Gender and climate change': from impacts to discourses. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 6(2), 223-238.
- 2 Neumayer, E., & Plümper, T. (2007). The gendered nature of natural disasters: The impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97(3), 551-566.
- 3 U. N. (2008) Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf
- 4 Ministry of National Resources, National Adaptation Programme of Action on Climate Change (NAPA) (Federal Republic of Somalia: Mogadishu, Apr. 2013), p. 14.
- 5 Pfeifer, C., Crane, T. A., Mugunieri, L. G., Farah, A. A., Dubad, A. B., Mohamed, A., ... & Ibrahim, S. J. (2018). The dynamics of natural resources in Somaliland—Implications for livestock production. ILRI Discussion Paper.
- 6 International Development Law Organization (IDLO), 'Strengthening Climate Justice in Somaliland: the Role of ADR Center' (march.2023)
- 7 Croome, A., & Hussein, M. (2020). Climate crisis, gender inequalities and local response in Somalia/Somaliland. *Forced Migration Review*, (64).
- 8 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2016). *Mainstreaming Gender in Climate Change Adaptation in Somalia*.
- 9 Rao, N., Lawson, E. T., Raditsoaneng, W. N., Solomon, D., & Angula, M. N. (2016). *Gendered vulnerabilities to climate change insights from the semi-arid regions of Africa and Asia* Information brief.
- 10 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Climate Change Can Negatively Impact Vulnerable Categories of Women* (October, 2022) <https://www.undp.org/uzbekistan/press-releases/climate-change-can-negatively-impact-vulnerable-categories-women>
- 11 UN Women. (2013). *Gender and Climate Change: Mapping the Linkages - A Scoping Study on Women and Climate Change in Somalia*.
- 12 United Nations Environment Programme, UN Women, UNDP and UNDP/PA/PSO (2020). *Gender, Climate and Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change*.
- 13 UN Women. (2018). *Assessment of gender mainstreaming in climate change adaptation and mitigation initiatives in Africa: Case study of Somaliland*.

About the Institute

The Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) is a teaching and research center at the University of Hargeisa, Somaliland. It was established in 2008 by the University of Hargeisa and Eastern Mennonite University in the United States of America to provide a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing conflict and violence in the Horn of Africa. The IPCS was the first Institute of its kind to engage in teaching and research in areas of peace and conflict studies, and remains the only one in the Somali-speaking region in the Horn of Africa. The Institute provides interested scholars, institute members, and students with the opportunity to engage in intensive interdisciplinary study and research on Somaliland and Somali-inhabited regions in the Horn of Africa.

About the Author

Najma Ismail Abdi is a staff member of the University of Hargeisa, Somaliland. Ms Najma has an MSc in Disaster Risk Management and Sustainable Development from Jijiga University, Ethiopia, and BSc in Environmental Sciences from University of Hargeisa, Somaliland.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for funding this study through the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA). We would also like to take the opportunity to thank many people for their personal and intellectual support to complete the paper. Without their invaluable contributions, it would not have been possible to complete and publish this informative study.

This publication is made possible by funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) in collaboration with African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA).

IPCS Briefing
ISSN: 2790-1084



Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies
University of Hargeisa
+252 (0) 63 442 7156
+252 (0) 63 442 6417
info@instituteforpeace.org
www.instituteforpeace.org

