



African women bear the brunt of climate change

Tracking the impact of the crisis in Nigeria and Mozambique

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Eco-feminists believe that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women by patriarchal power structures ‘must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully’ (Hobgood-Oster, 2002: 1). RACHAEL NYIRONGO analyses how gender inequalities in Africa impact climate change and exacerbate oppression of women on the continent.

The evolution of gender roles in African societies

In precolonial Africa women were not strictly confined to the homestead. They acquired skills that were essential for the community’s survival. For instance, women participated actively in the labour market in pottery-making, farming and other means of trade. Moreover, women usually played a crucial role in managing the finances of the household (Agbaje, 2019:1275-94). Unlike women in the Global North at that time, the role of African women was more adaptable and they could take part in male-dominated areas such as politics (*ibid.*). As a result, women would participate in the wider community as educators, farmers, wives, regents, priestesses, chiefs, elders and mothers (*ibid.*).



Colonisation adversely shifted the foundational ideologies that many African communities were built on. It established a more “Westernised Africa” impacting every aspect of life including language, national ideology and the gender paradigm (*ibid.*). Colonisation changed gender socialisation in Africa by introducing patriarchal systems that limited women’s social, political and economic activities within the communities (Montle, 2021:17771). These limitations placed rigid binaries around gender roles and established systems that dictated women remain in the private domain, making it no longer possible for women to carry out duties alongside men (Agbaje, 2019:1275-94). For instance, in Uganda, it was women who had led cotton cultivation until the British administration declared in 1923 that this could not be left to women (*ibid.*). The narrative that women could only be homemakers and bear children became predominant.

Patriarchy has since become ingrained in every aspect of the African way of life and the gender gap in Africa has continued to grow since colonisation. In some cases, it is enforced by the law – for example in the Congo Family Code of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which states, “the husband is the head of the household. He owes protection to his wife; his wife owes obedience to her husband.”¹ Practices such as early marriages exacerbate gender inequalities.

The impact of climate change on African women

Since women evolved into second-class citizens they have had to bear the brunt of the world’s crises. Unsurprisingly, climate change has disproportionately impacted women on the African continent. Climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities, and studies >>



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suggest that the complexity of social factors put women and other marginalised groups at greater risk of climate change impact over time (UNFCCC, 2022, para. 8). In developing countries, women are 14 times more likely than men to die during a climate catastrophe (UNDP, 2022). The livelihood of women farmers is more adversely impacted; research has indicated that women are more susceptible to the impacts of droughts and if they lose their source of income it is more difficult for women to secure work outside the farm. Women are also expected to continue doing unpaid family work (Erman *et al*, 2021:26).

Households in crisis have adopted coping mechanisms that worsen gender equality. Research shows that the girl child is usually one of the first members of a household to be affected by the impacts of climate change (UNFCCC, 2022, para. 8). It has become common practice to use child marriages as a means to raise capital in difficult times or to remove girl children from school to help with work around the home or farm (*ibid.*). Girls and women have the main responsibility for daily tasks such as fetching firewood or water for household activities. Climate change usually means they need to travel further to collect these and as a result, they are unable to continue with other activities critical for their development and livelihoods, such as attending school or going to work. Longer journeys expose them to greater risks of gender-based violence (GBV) outside the home (UNFCCC, 2022:para 27). These factors exacerbate gender inequality (UNFCCC, 2022:para 26).

Survival measures taken by the men in the household also have a domino effect on the lives of women and girls. Men are usually the ones to migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of work, which leaves the women with responsibilities they would not normally have had, such as taking care of the land. Despite this, sometimes men who migrate do not send money back to their families in rural areas as promised (UNFCCC, 2022:para 28). This places an even heavier burden on the women who remain behind; not only do they have an increased workload but also a decreased income. In many communities women are not able to own or inherit land that they are left to take care of, which leaves them even more vulnerable (UNEP, 2020:19).

Women and the plunder of the environment

The plunder of Africa's resources and consequently its environment has evolved over the years. What used to be carried out by colonisers is done by transnational companies today (Hormeku-Ajei and C. Goetz, 2021). The economic dynamics have been completely restructured as a result of colonisation. Pre-colonial African trade was mostly undertaken between Africans, with less need to export goods. After colonisation, Africa's global economic position became the provider of raw materials for the Global North. This has created African economies that are largely dependent on exports to survive (*ibid.*).



The increasing exportation of raw materials from the continent and the constant insatiable consumption by humanity have led to the continent's accelerating biodiversity loss. Over the past few decades, the extractives industry has developed enormously across the continent with oil, gas and minerals being directed to countries that have little to no extraction industry. Despite low-income communities predominantly working in these industries, they rarely benefit from them. The resources are used unsustainably and in some cases are lost to illegal activities, resulting in the flow of benefits from these activities declining over time (*ibid.*). Organised trans-national and trans-regional environmental crimes are rapidly increasing in Africa causing substantial harm to the environment, revenues, state security and sustainable development (Thiaw, nd).

The damage caused by these organisations largely goes unaccounted for due to lack of access to fair judicial proceedings, corrupt practices by government officials and lack of knowledge of the communities (*ibid.*). As a result of these practices, low-income and rural communities suffer, and the women are most affected.

Niger Delta

As Africa's largest delta, the Niger Delta is home to over 6.5 million people who depend on its resources (Chijioke, 2022). The Delta holds much of Nigeria's oil and gas reserves, the extraction of which has negatively impacted the biodiversity of the area and consequently the lives and livelihoods of communities who live in the area (Gabriel, 2004:1). The ecology of the Delta — coastal ridge barriers, mangroves and freshwater swamp forests, and lowland rainforests — determines the economic activities of the communities, especially of the women (*ibid.*:2). Women who live in the Delta's mangrove ecological system are largely involved in fishing and gathering seafood (*ibid.*). The mangroves are also a good source of firewood for domestic use and small-scale food processing. Within the freshwater swamps, women also rely on fishing to make a living, but also participate in gin distillation from raffia palm trees, the collection of African mango seeds, *Ogbono* (*Irvingia gabonensis*) and snails, and in weaving mats and other objects using screw pine, rattan palms and bulrushes (Gabriel, 2004). However, the economic activities in the mangroves and freshwater swamps are dependent on the women having access to these natural resources.

In the forests, the main economic activity for women is farming and fishing, typically on a small scale. Other economic activities include the collection of snails and other non-timber products, weaving, fuel wood gathering and tapping rubber trees. Pottery making is common across all areas of the Delta (*ibid.*). Women dominate in the trade of goods, local and long-distance. Thus, women are the group most impacted when the environment in the Delta is damaged by the oil industry (*ibid.*)

Pollution of the Delta

Although the region is one of the most resource-rich in the country, it is also one of the most underprivileged and undeveloped in the area (SERAP, 2022:14). In 1956, Shell was the first company to start pumping oil out of the region, soon followed by other companies. Since then, an estimated 40 million litres of oil is spilt annually (Ratcliffe, >>



2019), with an estimated 9,828 spills occurring within the last 10 years (Chijioke, 2022). The oil spills have been catastrophic for the region, causing damage to unique ecosystems. They have caused the contamination of the water the communities drink, the land they farm and the air they breathe. This has had tremendous impacts on the health of the population, with an estimated 16,000 infant deaths annually as a result of the pollution (Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission, 2019:4).

Those in the community who rely on farming, fishing and the other forms of economic activities mentioned above to make a living have been stripped of their livelihoods. Farmlands are now covered in oil, which prevents successful harvests, contaminates the crops and in turn exposes people to high levels of chromium, lead and mercury (Ratcliffe, 2019).

Women account for 60-80% of the farming labour force and they are the main caregivers for children and the elderly (Babatunde, 2022) Despite this, it is the men in the communities who benefit from a patronage system with the oil companies and the government. As a result, women are often not involved in the decision-making structures and lack access to socioeconomic and political resources that are enjoyed by men (*ibid.*). In a study carried out in 120 communities, it was revealed that only 8% of women own land.

A 51-year-old mother of five reported harvesting smaller yam and cassava tubers and no harvest at all in some parts of her field. She explained that as the market has changed, she as a farmer is no longer able to set prices for her produce but rather has to accept the prices offered. Just 20 years ago, the produce was much bigger and she could afford to buy all her necessities with the profits but the situation is very different now and has affected many areas of her life (Ratcliffe, 2019). She said it is now difficult to feed her family and send her children to school (*ibid.*).

For decades, women have organised themselves and protested against various injustices within the region, shutting down 40% of crude oil production in the early 2000s (*ibid.*). One of their grievances was that they received little compensation from the companies or government, despite being the most impacted group (Acey, 2022), as they did not own the land. Compensation was paid to the men who owned the land instead of the women who worked and lived off it (Gabriel, 2004). Women within the region have claimed that the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and National Gender Policy (NGP) have done little to change the status quo of women (Nwaoku, 2021). In a 2021 protest against the NDDC one of the women claimed:

Our men have failed us, we want to do what they have not been able to do. They have asked some of us to come for discussion; we are not ready to compromise. We are here for the right thing to be done. (ibid)

Victims of conflict in Mozambique

The province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique has for a long time been dealing with high poverty levels and lack of access to services. In 2010, huge natural gas reserves were discovered in Cabo Delgado, which attracted international investors (Mukpo, 2021). The communities that lived along the shorelines, among the poorest in



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the country, had relied on the sea to secure their livelihoods. However, once the gas was discovered they were relocated, which led to them losing their source of income (*ibid.*). Negotiations over compensation for the relocated communities were conducted by various stakeholders from Maputo's civil society who lacked the necessary linguistic and socio-cultural sensitivity and the compensation the communities received in the end was not fair, which fuelled the people's anger (Matsinhe, 2021).

The discovery of these lucrative natural resources also attracted the attention of Islamic State-supported militants and in 2017 the province was thrust into an armed insurgency, which escalated in 2020 and has resulted in a humanitarian crisis and mass displacement (Pinto, 2022:6). As of June 2022, there were over 940,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), most of them women and children (Unicef, 2022).

Experts have stated that the root cause of the conflict is the exclusion, marginalisation and poverty of the local communities resulting from the mega-gas projects in the area (Matsinhe, 2021).

A series of natural disasters have compounded the crisis caused by the insurgency. Mozambique is prone to cyclones, floods and droughts. It has been ranked as the third country most prone to natural disasters in Africa and fifth in the world (Longle, 2022). In the last 42 years, 15 droughts, 20 floods and 26 tropical cyclones have been registered (*ibid.*). The frequency of these events has been increasing at an alarming rate in the past few years; from 2013 to 2019 there have been 23 natural disasters (Kamer, 2022). The country has suffered almost back-to-back cyclones since 2019. In March and April 2019 Cyclone Idai and Cyclone Kenneth occurred consecutively, impacting 1.7 million people (REAP, 2022). Cyclone Chalane hit in late 2020, causing the second displacement of 270 families living in settlements and affecting over 314,000 people (*ibid.*:2.). In January 2021, Eloise hit and brought Tropical Storm Ana, which affected an estimated 125,000 people. The increase in frequency of these cyclones is a direct consequence of climate change (Kabukuru, 2022). One businesswoman said:

Before we used to hear of cyclones hitting every 10 years, but now how many do we expect in a year? We are tired of starting over. We need some peace of mind, we want to continue with our lives. (Longle, 2022)

Impact on women

As a vulnerable group, both conflict and climate change-induced disasters disadvantage women. During times of conflict or natural disasters, women are the first to lose their assets and jobs, and girls are at higher risk of dropping out of school (*ibid.*). However, women are still expected to carry out their household responsibilities ➤



despite the extraneous circumstances. The conflict and disasters cause thousands to be displaced, which results in changes within the household structures.

The displaced men in Mozambique lost their jobs which meant many were more present in the home, impacting the women's decision-making powers within the household (Pinto, 2022:8.). When men can no longer provide for their families their perceptions of masculinity may be challenged, creating hostile environments within households and resulting in an increase in gender-based violence against women. Although some men will take on some of the household responsibilities normally carried out by women, such as collecting firewood, most of the household responsibilities continue to fall to women and girls (*ibid*:9).

Around 70% of the displaced populations relied on agriculture to make a living. However, in 2022, 53% of the population living in settlements reported being unable to make any income, and were heavily dependent on humanitarian aid (*ibid*.). Only 40% reported that they can generate some form of income from agricultural activities, but not enough to be independent of humanitarian assistance (*ibid*:9). Some people, mostly women, have started small businesses selling alcoholic beverages which are in high demand by the men in the communities (*ibid*.). Others, particularly women in female-headed households, offered transactional sex to men to receive some of their humanitarian aid. As a result, some men take some of the aid from their families to use as payment in exchange for sex (*ibid*:10).

Women are normally expected to stay home to tend to their responsibilities in the household and on the farms. However, their movement has been even more restricted as IDPs, not only because they are still the main caregivers within the household, but also due to concern for their safety in volatile circumstances and by officials preventing them from leaving the settlements. This has meant they are limited in what they can do to make a living. Land distribution within the settlements is uneven – 44% of men have access to land compared to 15% of women (*ibid*.). This means the men have a greater say on what happens with the land, which is problematic for women, especially those in abusive relationships. Moreover, female-headed homes have a lower chance of getting access to land (*ibid*:9).

Access to water is also limited and in some of the settlements, the accessible water is untreated or contaminated. Women have reported that they dedicate several hours a day to accessing clean water. As they still need to carry out household duties during the day, many walk long distances at night to collect water. Medical facilities are also far from the settlements requiring many to walk long distances to access medical care. At night this can be unsafe for women who often choose to walk in groups for safety (*ibid*:11).

Many women caught up in conflict-affected areas have been taken captive. Some are used as sex slaves, forcibly married to insurgents or trafficked across borders (Wadekar and Ram, 2022). For those who do manage to escape, the threat of violence within the settlements is still very real; whether it be in their homes or when they venture out.



Conclusion

The situation of women in Nigeria and Mozambique is not unique; across the globe women are at risk as a result of patriarchal systems and inequalities. Although African women traditionally had more authority within their communities, the benefits they used to enjoy cannot be seen in any of the communities anymore.

Corruption and the ambitions of those in power have led to land grabbing that has left communities destitute. Although the problems start at home and within the family unit, there are systemic challenges that prevent women from being able to address these issues. Whilst solutions are delayed, women and children are unfairly impacted by pollution, displacement and natural disasters whilst still needing to carry out various responsibilities.

Although eco-feminists continue to fight patriarchal systems, it is clear that the exploitation of nature exacerbates the oppression of women that is already prevalent. Women need to be given more access to resources such as land to address the imbalance of power and allowed to gain independence and a means of livelihood. For this to happen, customs and laws that prevent women from having land rights need to change.

Finally, women need access to judicial remedies, which will allow them to protect their rights. Women cannot continue to seek justice through the same structures that are oppressing them; they need effective alternatives.

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ENDNOTE

- 1 See Article 444 of the Family Code of 1987 (Democratic Republic of Congo). **NA**