

Bypassing Africa's women in tackling climate change⁸⁶

When she received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo on 10 December 2004, Wangari Maathai described Africa's women as "the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families". As a result, she said, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage – including climactic instability – as resources become scarce, and have problems sustaining their families. The founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement pointed out that women involved in the movement have planted 20–30 million trees in Africa to counter forest loss and slow the spread of the deserts. She suggested that, "an holistic approach to development, as exemplified by the Green Belt Movement, could be embraced and replicated in more parts of Africa and beyond". Maathai urged African governments, led mostly by men, to do more about climate change. She has also urged them to have more respect for traditional knowledge and for women's experience while addressing this and other problems.

Yet, the reality is that women in Africa have limited access to productive assets, including land, and to other things necessary for production like credit and education. Women's work, even in food production, is undervalued. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women produce 80 per cent of the crops, but own only one per cent of the land. When a woman does own land, her holdings tend to be smaller and less fertile than those of men. Land reform schemes have often displaced complex systems of land use and tenure in which women had certain rights in common law and local practice, if not in legislation. New land titles are usually registered in the name of a male household head, regardless of women's economic contribution to the household, their customary rights, or the increasing number of female-headed households.

African women receive less than ten per cent of the credit to small farmers and one per cent of the total credit to agriculture. Their work of processing food – including such tasks as threshing, drying, winnowing, peeling, grating, sieving and pounding – and domestic tasks, such as fetching water and firewood, are largely invisible because little data are assembled. Men can also influence the uptake of new energy technologies in the women's domain of the kitchen. In one case in Zimbabwe, men are reported to have rejected the use of solar cookers by their wives, since technology and its development are seen traditionally as a male preserve. But steps could be taken to improve the situation. Ensuring that women's knowledge is preserved, for example, by documenting this knowledge and women's survival strategies in dryland areas and their expertise in integrated water management.

Country case studies throughout Africa – and emerging macroeconomic analysis – consistently show that gender-based inequality acts as a constraint to poverty reduction and sustainable development. These differences are too important to ignore, and their impacts too severe, especially given Africa's chronic food insecurity and environmental vulnerability.