

Gender Justice and Climate Justice

Building women's economic and political agency in times of climate change

By Patricia E. Perkins

Introduction

Women, who are usually unpaid or underpaid for their work, and are more vulnerable to climate change than men for a well-documented range of reasons, have special contributions to make towards climate change adaptation. This is mainly because of gendered differences in positional knowledge of ecological and water-related conditions. NGOs, and other civil society organizations in both the Global South and the North have important expertise in building community resilience to face climate change. These are fostered through community-based education, organizing, and alliances among different types of groups.

This article analyzes some initiatives and models for community-based climate change activism, through examples in three different types of communities. It outlines the methods and results of two international projects — the Sister Watersheds project, with Brazilian partners (2002-2008), and a Climate Change Adaptation in Africa project with partners in Mozambique, Kenya and South Africa (2010-2012) — as well as the Green Change Project in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood of northwest Toronto. The main point of this paper is to show that these projects have demonstrated that local-level initiatives led by civil society organizations provide a way to address gender equity challenges by building women's knowledge, interest and engagement in water-related and climate change politics.

Women and Climate Injustice

Many organizations and authors including WEDO, the Women's Environment and Development Organization, and WECAN, the Women's Earth and Climate Action Network International, maintain



LEFT: A guava farm started by women near Guanabara Bay in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil provides local food processing and marketing employment.

BELOW: Skills training for local girls.



PHOTOGRAPHS: PATRICIA E. PERKINS

that women are disproportionately affected by global climate change as a result of poverty, socially constructed gender inequalities, gendered work and family responsibilities, reliance on natural resources for livelihoods as part of "women's work", and the limited financial, social, and institutional resources available to women across the globe.

However, women are often key agents of change. They possess invaluable local ecological, social and political knowledge that is crucial for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Also, in their roles in the teaching, caring, health, and administrative professions, women's skills are central for community-building, social interdependence, and cultural change.

Everywhere, women are usually the local leaders, organizers and activists on water, food, and other environmental issues (Perkins, 2013). The women's movement has been very important in the construction of democratic governance in many countries in the Global South (for example, Brazil, South Africa, Chile), and the degree of women's political engagement is strongly

correlated with environmental and social priorities and even with reduced carbon emissions (Chalifour, 2014).

In times of climate change, women's organizing has led to efforts to train women for "green jobs" in many countries. For example, the Bangladesh microcredit organization Grameen Shakti has trained 5,000 women as solar PV technicians as part of its project to install more than 100,000 solar home energy systems. And in the dry northeast of Brazil, hundreds of women are being trained in concrete construction skills as part of the "one million cisterns" program to combat drought.

But there are strong barriers to women's political and economic involvement: gender roles and family responsibilities, the unpaid work and time commitment required, differential access to education (especially on technical issues) and public speaking training for women, to name a few. Training for both men and women in gender awareness and technical issues, as well as community environmental education, can help overcome the barriers to women's participation.

Unions and civil society organizations are calling for training, capacity-building and mentoring for women as part of the “green transition.” The International Labour Organization and its SustainLabour initiative advocate targeted support for women’s training and gender mainstreaming in green jobs development. The Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU, emphasizes opportunities for gender equality in new green jobs: “New environmentally-friendly jobs provide an opportunity to redress many of the gender imbalances in employment and skills” (COSATU, 2011). Unions in South Africa and Europe have led the “One Million Climate Jobs” campaigns highlighting the labour requirements of the “just transition” to more sustainable economies. However, there is little evidence that many programs benefitting women exist and have been successful.

International climate change adaptation funding mechanisms for activities in developing countries are slowly beginning to include gender equity requirements, although these have yet to become fully operational or complete. And in any case, existing international funding mechanisms are widely recognized as being completely inadequate to address the scale and breadth of climate-related needs.

Women, Commons, and Social Change

A fundamental economic transition towards more socially and ecologically sustainable societies tends to improve women’s economic position. Advancing commons and decentralized economic governance are two strategies that improve women’s socio-economic position. For example, in Toronto, community and rooftop gardens, urban fruit harvesting and community kitchens, which build local food economies and reduce fuel use for food transportation, create interrelated commons of many kinds that are reliant on social interactions (rather than impersonal market mechanisms) and have spin-offs that increase community resilience. These new institutions also create many jobs for women and shift political decision-making to local levels where women have more confidence, voice, and power.

I have worked on two projects, one with



African project partners discussed climate change and women’s role in water governance at the project’s inception meeting in Brazil.

partners in Brazil and another with African partners, that developed methods for gendered training, community-based environmental and climate education, and interventions to increase women’s political participation. The Sister Watersheds project in Brazil and Canada (2002-2008) developed and tested training programs and workshops led by local NGO partners. Workshops focused on water management, environmental education, community development, and democratic participation. The Climate Change and Water Governance in Africa project (2009-2012) developed methods to improve watershed governance for climate change adaptation, worked to increase resilience and adaptive capacity of women, and built activist-academic climate justice networks in Durban, South Africa; Maputo, Mozambique; and Nairobi, Kenya.

Some of the methods these projects developed and used for building civil society’s and women’s effective engagement included:

- In Durban, “learning journeys”, toxic tours, community mapping, films/videos,

- In Maputo, school activities/environmental education,
- In Nairobi, building soccer fields in slum floodplains, local political organizing, and “climate debt” activism.

All of these activities tend to rely on and develop women’s local ecological knowledge and leadership, since in the Global South as well as the North, women are the mainstays of most environmental and education organizations. Even the soccer field development in Nairobi emphasized women’s participation, because the youth violence prevention organization required that young women be members of all the soccer teams involved, and the upgraded sports field created spaces for older women traders to assemble and sell snacks and drinks at the soccer games.

Most of the groups who participated in our climate justice projects are headed by women — both academic and civil society organizations. International networking creates opportunities for mentorship, funding, student exchanges, internships,

PHOTOGRAPH: PATRICIA E. PERKINS

and other career advancements for both young and older women.

Such techniques work in the global North, too. For example, a community environmental education methodology developed in Brazil at the Ecor Institute for Citizenship called the “workshop of the future” was introduced to Toronto activists and students by Brazilian exchange students during the Sister Watersheds project, and used very successfully with youth groups in after-school programs in the low-income Jane and Wilson neighbourhood. The “workshop of the future” involves the group’s building a metaphorical “wall of tears” of paper bricks labeled with all the things people don’t like about their community (pollution, crime, racism, etc.), and then creating a “tree of dreams” with leaves labeled all the good things the community possesses (youth energy, seniors’ wisdom, local ecological knowledge, etc.). Since trees as they grow can break down any wall, the workshop helps groups realize their community’s potential to work together to create a better future.

In the Jane/Finch neighbourhood in northwest Toronto, activists are creating a Centre for Green Change on the first floor of a low-income social housing building, to promote environmental awareness and green job training. The Centre for Green Change includes a community kitchen, workshop and computer space, and a garden outside. Its programs allow community members to meet, share skills, learn about the environment, develop their skills and confidence, find jobs, and take political action on locally-relevant environmental issues. For example, seniors who meet each other at the community garden may check in on each other throughout the winter and on hot days in summer. Parents may exchange childcare as well as fruit and vegetables from the garden.

New Brunswick climate change activist Kim Reeder of the St-Croix Estuary Project has noted how community members check in on and support each other during floods and extreme weather events, creating resilience in tight-knit communities that builds on local social, political, and ecological knowledge (Reeder, 2014).

TABLE 1: Women’s Capacity Building in Climate Politics Bottom-Up Strategies for Water Management

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Green Change Agents training: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) run workshops for local youth in certificate programs helping develop job-related skills such as environmental building audits, green construction, green roof landscaping, floodplain rehabilitation, green infrastructure, etc.

Dry sanitation: Distribution and education/advocacy/promotion of urine diversion toilets.

Leadership training: Distribution and education/advocacy/promotion of urine diversion toilets.

Water conflict mediation training: Special CSO-run training programs address water conflicts (e.g. over standpipe access, fugitive emissions of pollutants, riparian rights, etc.) through skills training and information on how to access government supports.

Academic-activist linkage building: Students get academic credit for internships with local civil society organizations, and help document their work and write funding applications; professors research and disseminate the methods and accomplishments of community groups.

Water harvesting: CSOs work with household members to develop ways of retaining rainfall from roofs and yards for home and garden use, and spread related practices.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community mapping: For community awareness and engagement, residents collectively draw and discuss maps of important water features in the neighborhood and how extreme weather affects them.

Community kitchens: CSOs or churches establish kitchen space for collective food preservation, processing and cooking and for feeding vulnerable community members and buffering time pressures for women.

Community-based water monitoring: Community groups work with government authorities to monitor pollution, bio-status, and flooding/drought in local waterways.

Community gardening: CSOs locate space and train and organize community members to plant gardens for collective food production.

POLITICAL INTERACTION

Collective dialogue: Local residents discuss specific water issues with government officials, in forums facilitated by civil society organizations.

Sports field and league development: CSOs and youth groups organize social and recreational activities to make use of floodplains and advocate for their preservation as open, public space.

Collaborative learning: Watershed committees bring together key civil society groups from throughout the watershed (e.g. journalists, teachers, artists, government officials) to discuss and develop needed action programs on water-related issues.

Watersheds and Climate Justice

Another way to understand and foster the changes needed for more sustainable socio-economies is to use a watershed

perspective. Entire watersheds are affected by housing and infrastructure damage due to extreme weather events (especially flooding), but low-income people are

more severely affected. Protecting the whole watershed means strengthening the weakest link, since the interests of those upstream and downstream, rich and poor, are all interrelated. Climate adaptation and mitigation takes work and produces jobs; green community development allows those in low-income neighbourhoods to train and gain experience for employment in climate adaptation and mitigation, which builds resilience throughout watersheds. Women's work, jobs, and skills are essential and can be easily recognized as climate jobs for climate justice through a watershed lens.

For example, in Toronto's Christmas 2013 ice storm (the kind of extreme weather event that is becoming more frequent due to climate change), more than 300,000 households remained without electricity for days in frigid temperatures. The whole city learned that downed power lines, besides interrupting lights, refrigeration, stoves and heat, can mean no water in apartment and condo towers if municipal pumping stations lose electricity. Social networks based around schoolchildren and their families and friends, relatives, churches, and other groups emerged as a key element of the city's resilience strategy, and valuable lessons were learned that will inform the city's official and unofficial responses in any future climate crises.

Watersheds, with their interrelated

tributaries, form a good way of understanding the branching social interactions that are increasingly essential in times of climate change.

In conclusion, community actions designed to strengthen women's confidence, access, and ability to participate in local policy-making on climate change and water issues can have powerful, beneficial results. Women's situated knowledge and leadership are crucially important to help communities deal effectively with cli-

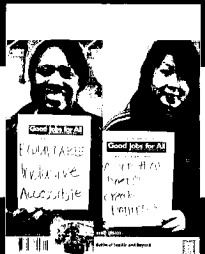
mate change. International collaboration can support and inspire local communities' initiatives, which advance climate justice by promoting gender justice. ☸

Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins is a Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. She has directed several research projects related to gender, participatory water governance, and climate change with partners in Brazil, South Africa, Mozambique, and Kenya.

References

- Campaign Against Climate Change: One Million Climate Jobs: www.climate-change-jobs.org
- Chalifour, Nathalie (2014). "How a gendered understanding of climate change can help shape Canadian climate policy," paper presented at the Society for Socialist Studies meeting, May 27, 2014, Brock University, Ontario.
- COSATU Policy Framework on Climate Change [2011]. "Principle 8": <http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/policy/2011/pol11119.html>
- Perkins, Patricia E. (2013). "Environmental activism and gender", chapter 31 in **Gender and Economic Life**, edited by Deborah Figart and Tonia Warnecke (Northampton, MA; Edward Elgar), pp. 504-521.
- Reeder, Kim (2014). "Mobilizing local networks for climate change vulnerability assessments: lessons learned from the St-Croix Estuary Project, New Brunswick," paper presented at the Canadian Association of Geographers conference, May 28, 2014, Brock University, Ontario.
- Schatatek, Liane (2009). "Policy Paper: Gender and Climate Finance: Double Mainstreaming for Sustainable Development." <http://www.boell.org/web/136-318.html>
- Sustain Labour: International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development: www.sustainlabour.org
- Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO): www.wedo.org
- Women's Earth and Climate Action Network, International (WECAN): <http://wecaninternational.org>

Best Wishes from Our Times to Women & Environments, our sister in the struggle.



www.ourtimes.ca
• SUBSCRIBE •

The Underground, one of the best restaurants at York University, has taken a leading role towards being environmentally responsible. Our efforts have included:

REDUCING
We effectively manage solid waste by using materials that are environmentally preferable; for example, we use thinner and lighter packaging for takeout orders and off-site catering.

RECYCLING
Whenever possible we recycle; The Underground uses recyclable materials and composts approximately 95% of its food waste daily.

Bervin Sumlang, Executive Chef
Liz Dexter, General Manager
myunderground.ca



UNDERGROUND