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## Gender mainstreaming and climate change

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## SYNOPSIS

Gender mainstreaming refers to the process of incorporating a gender perspective to any action, policy, legislation or action in order to ensure that the concerns of all are addressed and that gender inequalities are not perpetuated through institutional means. However the implementation of gender mainstreaming across the globe has not necessarily resulted in advances for women, as it is usually associated with a winding back of women-focused policies and programs. Emerging research indicates that climate change has significant gendered impacts and yet policies and practices designed to address and shape mitigation and adaptation strategies have failed to incorporate gender mainstreaming. Further the scientific and technological focus of many of these institutional responses has led to a lack of attention to social outcomes more generally. This has resulted in a lack of attention to the vulnerable groups, including women. This paper outlines an argument not only for gender mainstreaming of climate policy but also for policy focused specifically on women's empowerment. Gender mainstreaming is essential in ensuring that not only climate policies and programs are comprehensive, but so too are women-focused policies designed to ensure that women are supported and empowered to take action on their own behalf.

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## Introduction

Writing on the complex links between gender-based violence and climate change in an earlier publication (Alston, 2012), I argued for greater attention to gender in climate change discourse, policies, actions and strategies. This paper takes this argument further calling for gender mainstreaming to be introduced into emerging policy areas related to climate change. However it would be unwise to imagine an uncomplicated process that passes a gender lens over all climate responses with the result that gender vulnerability is addressed and gender equality achieved. This paper takes an in-depth look at gender mainstreaming, its history and manifestations and discusses ways that gender mainstreaming might create the space for transformative change in gender power relations in post-disaster situations.

Climate change is a major factor in twenty-first century global experience with a rise in catastrophic and slow-onset climate events. Irrefutable evidence is emerging across the globe in sites subject to climate variability and climate catastrophes

that disaster experiences are gendered and that women are particularly vulnerable during and after climate events (Enarson, 2009; Lambrou & Piana, 2006; Lambrou & Nelson, 2010; Neumayer & Pluemper, 2007).

In this paper I draw attention to the gendered experiences of women in relation to climate change and call on governments to recommit to gender mainstreaming in the policies, institutional and legislative frameworks designed to address climate issues. An analysis of gender mainstreaming is essential in understanding ways transnational, national and local bodies might usefully address climate challenges with gender-sensitivity. A failure to do this risks cementing gender inequalities in post-disaster and reconstruction efforts because of the inherently inequitable power relations, resource allocations and underpinning assumptions on which responses to climate disasters are based. Conversely climate change experience gives the context and capacity to re-interrogate gender mainstreaming and its radical potential to provide transformative changes in gender relations in the emerging and volatile climate and post-disaster space.

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## History of gender mainstreaming

Over 50,000 women gathered as delegates and observers at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The number of attendees was bolstered by the perception of many women across the world that, despite twenty years of activity since the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, there had been no significant shift in women's disadvantaged position. A Declaration and Platform for Action was released at the conclusion of the conference (see [UNWomen, 2012](#)) calling on governments across the world to recommit to gender equality and the empowerment of women. The Beijing Conference marked a watershed between policy frameworks as delegates urged governments and other institutions to move from a more limited policy focus on women and their perceived failings, to one focusing on gender equality ([Walby, 2005](#)). Governments and transnational organizations were challenged to move from viewing gender inequality as a women's issue, to be addressed through women's policy units and policy directed at women, to a broader acceptance that gender disadvantage required a whole of government/organization response across all areas of policy and practice to expose the inbuilt and traditional economic, social, cultural and political biases against women.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, following the 1975 Mexico World Conference and the subsequent UN declared Decade for Women, many countries had established and enacted women-focused instrumentalities and policies. It is important to note that these had built dedicated sites and discourses exposing women's disadvantage and empowering women. However, the institutional, legal and cultural customs that established relations of power and gender inequalities were largely left un-interrogated ([Alston, 2006](#); [Walby, 2005](#)). Delegates urged a more substantive approach that analyzed all areas of policy, program formulation and structures for gender bias.

The groundswell of support in Beijing for a new gender mainstreaming framework was surprisingly successful and has had global implications. [True and Mintrom \(2001,27\)](#) note how gender mainstreaming spread quickly across the world in a process of 'global diffusion' that led even those countries with a poor record on gender equality to establish institutional gender mainstreaming structures. One of the critical factors in this spread has been the international non-government organizations (INGOs) and transnational women's networks working to expose inequalities and empower women.

What is also clear nearly twenty years on from Beijing is that gender mainstreaming holds a significant promise for addressing inequalities but has failed to deliver substantive change. Gender mainstreaming has become an 'empty signifier' ([Council of Europe, 1998](#)), heavily dependent on cultural context. Gender inequalities persist and women are disadvantaged against almost all socio-economic indicators including education, health, employment, income and experiences of poverty. They are over-represented amongst the poorest of the poor, are largely excluded from ownership of land, agricultural resources and from decision-making bodies, undertake a vast majority of the caring and unpaid work, are vulnerable to gender based violence, and are subject to customs that significantly oppress them. Across the world women and girls are disadvantaged simply because they are female. Climate

change opens up a new area of inquiry into the way gender inequalities are experienced and addressed during and after a catastrophic event providing a space that allows a reexamination of gender mainstreaming.

## Climate change

Climate change refers to the buildup of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere causing major changes in climate and catastrophic events ([IPCC, 2007](#)). Debate has focused on the extent to which anthropogenic causes are responsible for climate variations or whether they are part of natural cycles ([IPCC, 2007](#)). This debate has led to a fixation on scientific and technological solutions at the expense of detailed analysis of social and gendered outcomes ([Alston, 2012](#); [Alston & Whittenbury, 2012](#)).

Nonetheless evidence is increasing that climate variability has major global consequences and that these include melting of the polar ice caps, sea and air temperature rises, and an increase in catastrophic events such as storm surges, more frequent and violent cyclones, rainfall events and droughts ([IPCC, 2007](#)). Research is emerging that these events and climate changes are causing major disruption to food and water security, to food production cycles and to how and where food is produced ([FAO, 2007](#)). They are also having major effects on individuals, households and communities affected by catastrophic events in the areas of health, housing, access to clean water, food security and sanitation ([Dankelman, 2010](#); [Pelling, 2011](#)).

Global uncertainty about climate change and resulting food and water security is heightened by rising world populations (predicted to increase from 7 to 9 billion by 2040), widening wealth differentials within and between countries, wars and conflicts, a looming peak oil crisis, a rise in fundamentalism and changes in power relations between countries and regions ([United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012](#)). While climate change is not the only factor causing major disruption, in concert with others it constitutes a major global challenge, and one that exacerbates gender inequalities.

Gender is recognized as a significant indicator of vulnerability during and after climate events. [Dankelman \(2010\)](#) argues that gender vulnerability is compounded by a loss of control over natural resources, including water, the means of production, information, and decision-making; time poverty; a breakdown of educational and employment opportunities; increased exposure to unsafe conditions; and reduced capacity for local organizing. Women are much more likely to be living in poverty, to have no ownership of land and resources to protect them in a post-disaster situation, to have less control over production and income, less education and training, less access to institutional support and information, less freedom of association, and fewer positions on decision-making bodies. Women are more constrained by their responsibilities for the aged and children, and during and after a climate event are more likely to die and or be exposed to violence ([Alston, Whittenbury, & Haynes, 2011](#); [Dankelman & Jansen, 2010](#)).

[Dankelman \(2010: 59\)](#) argues that women have less access to resources that are essential to disaster preparedness, mitigation and rehabilitation, and that their workloads increase not only because men are more likely to migrate to look for work

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