

# Intersections of Gender and Marital Status in Accessing Climate Change Adaptation: Evidence from Rural Tanzania

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**Summary.** — Climate scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of gender in climate change vulnerability, but often either dichotomize men and women as homogeneous categories or limit themselves to comparing male- and female-headed households. We use an intersectionality framework to examine how the adaptive strategies of Tanzanian farmers are mediated through their gender and marital statuses. Drawing on focus group discussions and using logistic regression to analyze questionnaire data, we compare the relative adoption of the different adaptive strategies of single, married, divorced, and widowed men and women. Our study shows that, while a woman's marital status is a vital factor in determining her access to adaptive strategies, it is a less important factor in the case of men. We show that, compared with other women, widows and female divorcees are disadvantaged in the field of agricultural water management, and divorced women assume relatively more income-earning activities outside the farming sector. Finally, we find evidence of livelihood diversification at the household level through specialization by individual household members. Based on the empirical evidence, we develop a typology with which to synthesize the linkages between gender, marital status, and adaptive strategies; and we subsequently emphasize the importance of an intersectionality approach to gender and climate change policy and practice.  
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**Key words** — climate change adaptation, gender, marital status, livelihood diversification, Africa, Tanzania

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### (a) *Adapting to a changing climate*

The contribution of this article to the climate change literature is to improve our understanding of how gender and marital status intersect in determining the access that different types of households have to various adaptive strategies. Although an increasing number of climate scholars acknowledge the importance of gender, they often do so merely to note the different impacts of climate change on women and men, or on female- *versus* male-headed households. Here we analyze how weather-related changes might affect women and men differently in terms of their access to resources and adaptive strategies, such as livelihood diversification and agricultural water management. We argue that, while a comparison between male- and female-headed households is a valuable first step in climate change analysis, it is also important to try and transcend this level of analysis and to recognize the diverse positions of different types of female-headed households (Bhattarai, Beilin, & Ford, 2015; Huynh & Resurrección, 2014), as well as the different positions of women and men in male-headed households. Consequently, the relevance of this research to policy lies in its conclusion that it is unwise to assume that homogeneity exists among “women”, “men”, or “female-headed households”, for these categories consist of individuals with varying degrees of access to climate change adaptation strategies.

In the research presented here, we focus on intersections of gender and marital status and compare married (or cohabiting), divorced (or separated), widowed and single (having never married) men and women. Based on academic literature reviews and on the focus group discussions that one of us (Katrien Van Aelst) conducted during field research in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania, we select two dimensions of climate change adaptation for discussion—livelihood diversification and agricultural water management (irrigation and

valley farming).<sup>1</sup> We combined the data from the focus groups with those from a questionnaire derived from 845 respondents across four villages to answer the following two research questions. First, to what extent does a person's gender and marital status determine his or her adoption of adaptive strategies in both the fields of agricultural water management and livelihood diversification? In other words, how do the statuses of being married, divorced, widowed, or single affect a person's access to these adaptive strategies? We develop a typology to illustrate the intersections between gender, marital status, and access to adaptive strategies. Second, given that a person's marital status has a bearing on his or her level of vulnerability and ability to adapt to climate change, what constraints and opportunities work toward determining the differential paths to adaptation of the various marital categories?

We have structured the article as follows. Section 1 starts with a brief discussion of climate change and adaptation in Tanzania, followed by an introduction to the intersectionality approach we use. Subsequently, we give an overview of, first, the literature that compares adaptation across male- and female-headed households and, second, research that has taken the analysis a step further by using an intersectionality perspective. Then, after a brief description of our data collection and research methods, we embark on a description of the study site (Section 2). Section 3 comprises the empirical analysis, followed by a discussion (Section 4), then summary of the main results and concluding remarks (Section 5).

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(b) *Gendered vulnerability and adaptation in Tanzania*

Tanzania, like many other sub-Saharan African countries, is facing the challenge of having to adapt to a changing climate. The impacts of the projected climate change for Tanzania range from growing incidences of natural hazards like droughts, earthquakes, floods and storms (World Bank, 2014, p. 302), rising temperatures, and changes in river flows to less predictability of already highly variable rainfalls. Likely manifestations of the latter are shifts in the onset of the rainy season, as well as more concentrated and heavier rainfalls (IPCC, 2014; United Republic of Tanzania, 2014). The consequences of this are dire for local farmers, who mostly depend for their survival on small-scale, rain-fed agriculture (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014). The changing climatic conditions threaten their livelihoods and food security (Arndt, Farmer, Strzepek, & Thurlow, 2011; Kakota, Nyariki, Mkwambisi, & Kogi-Makau, 2011) because they are causing reductions in the yields of, among other crops, maize, sorghum, and rice (Rowhani, Lobell, Linderman, & Ramankutty, 2011).

Adaptation to climate change refers to a strategy to reduce and manage the risks associated with the phenomenon (IPCC, 2014). Among the adaptive strategies that small-scale farmers<sup>2</sup> use in the Morogoro Region are livelihood diversification, migration, agricultural intensification—for example, irrigation and switching to “fast crops” that produce a larger number of harvests per year—and coping strategies such as selling assets and livestock to purchase food and applying for government food assistance (Below *et al.*, 2012; Eriksen, Brown, & Kelly, 2005; Goldman & Riosmena, 2013; Paavola, 2008; Ponte, 2002; van Donge, 1992). Adaptation strategies can thus take many different forms and they often reflect local development strategies (such as practices that also improve livelihood security or increase agricultural production). Livelihood diversification and agricultural water management are thus strategies that respond not only to climate change but also to the other environmental, social, and economic drivers that the changing climate exacerbates and reinforces (Eakin, 2005).

Tanzania’s climate change policies (Smucker *et al.*, 2015) largely neglect the interplay between climate change and the various socio-cultural, institutional, and political dimensions of development that influence an individual’s vulnerability, namely the exposure to risk as well as the ability or inability to deal with risky events (Ellis, 2006). More specifically, Tanzania’s National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2007) and the National Climate Change Strategy (United Republic of Tanzania, 2012) ignore the fact that different categories of farmers might be differentially exposed to climate change risks, for instance because they are more dependent on natural resources. These policies also fail to acknowledge that some categories of farmers may find it more difficult than others to handle risky climate change events. For example, a lack of resources such as cash, credit, land, networks, education or time may lower their adaptive capacity (Adger, 1999; Below *et al.*, 2012; Berman, Quinn, & Paavola, 2015). Along the same lines, Tanzanian climate policies are insensitive to gender issues and treat women as one homogeneous group; in other words, they disregard the fact that some of the adaptation strategies discussed above might be less available to specific categories of women, such as female household heads. As Smucker *et al.* (2015) point out, this neglect of differentiated vulnerability and adaptive capacity alongside the existing cultural, institutional, and political drivers of inequality does not entirely

come as a surprise; it is in keeping with Tanzania’s development policies, which tend to seek system stability by strengthening the status quo.

If anything, such simplified diagnoses and the policies arising from them, which treat rural communities as undifferentiated, run the risk of exacerbating rather than addressing existing inequalities. This is exactly why we decided to adopt an intersectionality approach to this research, which focuses specifically on the intersections of “gender” and “marital status”.

(c) *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality addresses the relationships between the multiple dimensions of social identities and subject formations (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005). It denotes the various ways in which categories such as race and gender organize social relations, as well as reinforce and mutually constitute each other (Shields, 2008). In this article, when we use the word intersectionality, we mean that gender and other social categories such as marital status interact to shape people’s experiences of climate change. Marital status is a non-static social category that structures the social (gender) relations, rights and duties, especially of women. We understand gender, intersecting with the category of marital status, as discursively produced (Butler, 1990; Francis, 2008) and manifested in women’s and men’s concrete actions (Nayak & Kehily, 2006). While women and men discursively produce and reproduce their gender subjectivities through everyday practices, they are nevertheless able, as subjects, to negotiate these subjectivities through subversive acts and speech (Foucault, 1978).

Although climate scholars do take gender into account, most do so in a way that differentiates the climatic impacts on allegedly homogeneous categories of women and men, rather than analyzing how weather-related changes are likely to affect different types of women and men. Gradually, however, more research is emerging that addresses gender in a more nuanced way. In what follows we give an overview of studies on agricultural water management and livelihood diversification, starting with those that analyze differences between male- and female-headed households, then followed by those that address the differences among female-headed households.

Chant (1997) argues that women in female-headed households experience poverty—and we could argue vulnerability—differently from women in male-headed ones. While women in female-headed households often have to endure the problem of a limited asset base, women in male-headed ones have less access to and control over the assets in the household. Upperman (2000) illustrates how female-headed households are unable to compete with male-headed ones in accessing irrigation water in northern Tanzania mainly because they lack certain resources, such as time, and have weaker social relations with the male water guards. The evidence on land titling, however, shows female-headed households occasionally able to reap the benefits of their greater independence. Englert (2008) illustrates this point in her study on land access among the Luguru people (Morogoro Region). She found that even when women are aware of their rights to joint land registration,<sup>3</sup> they tend to be hesitant about claiming these rights in case their husband takes it as a sign that they plan to leave the marriage. In other words, women are likely to prioritize marital harmony over their individual land rights. Englert’s findings illustrate, first, that since unmarried, divorced, and widowed women find it *easier* to buy land in their own right, marital status indeed plays a crucial role in

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