

# “STRENGTHENING VOICES: SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS”

Women’s Tribunals on Gender and Climate Justice, Fall 2011

Climate change is mainly felt at the grassroots level, mostly by women who are considered to be the custodians of food, fuel, and water. Despite this fact, women have little knowledge on how to adapt to it or mitigate its impact on their lives.



Credit: Naimul Haq/IPS

**“This place is hell. We are being tested to see how much more of this torture we can tolerate.”**

- Shumi Akhtar, Char Nongolia, Bangladesh

Once known for its rich forests, Char Nongolia is now barren and surrounded by islands of accumulated silt

The Feminist Task Force (FTF) and the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, together with Greenpeace International and Inter Press Service (IPS), organized the “Strengthening Voices: Search for Solutions” – Women’s Tribunals on Gender and Climate Justice, a series of fifteen tribunals and hearings in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Held in the Fall of 2011, the Women’s Tribunals involved a collection of authentic and specific testimonies of grassroots and rural women who have experienced climate change related problems in their lives and communities, and their search for innovative and successful solutions to them.

The largest socially excluded group, women are more vulnerable – economically, socially, and politically – to the detrimental effects of climate change and environmental degradation, which only increase gaps in gender inequality. Women’s cultural role as the guardians of family life, as well as their heavy involvement in agriculture across the global South further hinder their

adaptability to environmental degradation while excessively adding to such responsibilities.

Unsurprisingly, many of the testimonies share specific trends linked to climate change and the current global business model, such as:

- **Loss of profitable farmland and livestock**
- **Decreased food security**
- **Loss or contamination of local water supplies**
- **Migration and displacement**
- **Both mental and physical illness**

**All of these outcomes have led to inexcusable increases in poverty levels.**

Undoubtedly, climate change is not merely affecting certain populations of the globe in a broad number of ways, but impacting an entire one-half of humanity directly and specifically. Again, due to these challenges, the issues women must currently deal with across these fifteen countries – Argentina, Ghana, India, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Tanzania,

Uganda, Pakistan, Nepal, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, Brazil, and Nigeria – share many commonalities. Overall, policy suggestions and outcomes from the tribunals adamantly call for adaptive



Credit: Edgardo Ayala /IPS

In El Salvador, tribunal participants described how the impact of climate change is an especially heavy burden for women, who face increasing stress from having to provide meals and water for their families

strategies focused on women and their communities, as well as proposals at the local, state, and international levels for effective action addressing and remedying the challenges presented by climate change and extractive industries.

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**“For hundreds of millions of people in Africa, climate change is not about lowering smoke stack emissions or turning off electric lights.**

**It is about whether or not they will have enough to eat.”**

- The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

### Significantly Decreased Agricultural Production

Findings from the Women’s Tribunals clearly indicated a link between climate change and decreased agricultural production, as well as its obvious impact on women’s economic security. In many developing countries, the agriculture sector plays a fundamental role in national economies. Traditionally rooted to the family and the home, women generally rely on agriculture for their income. Due to climate change, large decreases in agricultural production have become noticeable. Therefore, entire livelihoods have been devastated, ultimately leading to increased poverty, most notably among rural women. Furthermore, the current global profit model was found to yield similar devastating effects.

### Food Insecurity and Decreased Food Sovereignty

Coupled with abating agricultural productivity, food insecurity and food sovereignty were also central focuses in many testimonies. Climate change-induced flooding, draughts, and other climate variability has led to loss of crop and animal life. In such situations, the basic essentials for human survival become no longer available. Furthermore, due to cultural customs, such as prioritizing the nutrition needs of men and children, women in the global South suffer most. Multinational agribusinesses, too, have infringed on the food sovereignty of the women testifiers and their communities.

### Loss or Contamination of Local Water

Due to desertification caused by climate variability and irresponsible deforestation, water has become a

**A distinguished panel of jurists offered their policy recommendations at the end of each tribunal. These were the most prevalent responses:**

To the international community

- Apply a gender perspective to all international agreements related to climate change, including actions for mitigation and adaptation
- Ensure that developed countries ratify the climate change international treaties and policies, as well as implement them
- Effective monitoring should be required of all international treaties, ensuring women’s concerns are integrated and addressed

On the state/local level

- Integrate a gender approach to mitigation and adaptation to climate change in the design, planning and implementation of policies, programs and projects at all levels that will lead to greater equitable management of resources and environmental protection
- Enhance awareness, knowledge, and information about climate change and associated impacts among the community, especially among vulnerable groups, most notably women

scarce resource for an alarmingly large number of rural communities, which not only limits access to a basic human necessity, but increases the burden of women. Traditionally in charge of maintaining family and home life, women are forced to walk longer distances in search of water for cooking and washing which once could be accessed close to homes. In addition to increased physical strain, longer absences from the home due to water scarcity have also caused disruptions in family cohesion, which, because women are so tied to the responsibility of upholding the family’s well-being, hinders both their social and economic empowerment.

Desertification, too, has deprived farmers of their livelihoods by rendering once-fertile crop land unusable. Contamination of water supplies, most often due to illegal and environmentally-degrading practices of the extractive industries, was also highlighted in a number of the tribunals.

### Migration and Displacement

Many rural women and their families have lost their means of income – mainly in the agricultural sector – as climate variability and irresponsible methods of environmental extraction have increased in frequency and scale. Often, their male counterparts will migrate to different

regions in search of work, leaving wives and daughters to fend for themselves. Increases in male migration have burdened rural women with larger workloads and family responsibilities. Rural populations have also undergone feminization and aging, while migrant women are exposed to violence and emotional, physical, and sexual exploitation in their new surroundings. Forced to begin anew multiple times, women lose vital sources of stable income, such as profitable cropland, livestock, and core clientele of any microbusinesses they run; when male members of households emigrate or die due to climate disasters, these problems are further exacerbated.

### Impacts on Human Health

Several – if not all – of the aforementioned impacts of climate change and extractive industries have imposed immense stress on the physical and mental health of rural women in the global South. Malnutrition, physical and mental abuse, physical ailments resulting from increased burdens, and waterborne diseases are all symptoms of these stresses. In many cases, psychological strain, such as fits of depression or perpetual anxiety, were also found to follow loss of livelihoods, homesteads, and the lives of husbands and children.

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