Gender Equality, Women’s Rights, and Environmental Sustainability

The Case of Climate Change

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Abstract

This paper seeks to draw attention to the linkages between gender equality, women's rights, and climate change by exploring its international legal and policy dimension. To this end, the paper describes how these linkages have been addressed both within the international climate change regime and the international human rights regime. The analysis shows that both regimes have recognized, to a certain extent, the importance of integrating a gender and human rights perspective into efforts to tackle climate change. However, so far, attempts to integrate both perspectives have taken a parallel rather than an integrated approach. Therefore, the author highlights the need for a gender-responsive human rights-based approach to climate change.

Keywords


1 Introduction

The signs of climate change and global warming are all around us. Climate change poses huge challenges to every country in the world, not only because of its environmental impacts but also because of the economic and social issues it raises. The 2007 UNDP Human Development Report stated that “climate change is the defining human development issue of our generation.”

For millions of people climate change means loss of livelihood, displacement, conflict, hunger, and poverty. As such, the effects of climate change can and are already jeopardizing the progress made so far by development. At the same time, climate change also affects our notion of development as it becomes crucial to find ways to align the pursuit of development with the avoidance of further destroying our planet. Climate change is not only interfering with development and the right to it. It is also undermining a broad range of other internationally protected human rights such as rights to life and security, health, adequate food, water, shelter, and property. For developing countries and vulnerable populations dealing with climate change has become a daily struggle to survive.

However, the impacts of climate change are not only disproportionately felt by the poorest and most vulnerable communities. There are also disparities along the gender lines. The aim of this paper is to critically assess the linkages between gender equality, women’s rights, and climate change from an international legal perspective. First, the linkages between gender equality, women’s rights, and climate change are briefly addressed (Section II). Second, an extensive overview is provided of the way these linkages have been made in the international climate change regime and the international human rights regime (Section III). Based on this overview, the author then discusses the need for a gender-responsive human rights-based approach to climate change as a complementary and reinforcing tool to gender mainstreaming (Section IV). To conclude, existing gaps at the international level are highlighted and the relevance in a national context is demonstrated.

2 Linking Gender Equality, Women’s Rights, and Climate Change

The linkages between gender equality, women’s rights, and climate change are highly complex and multi-dimensional. However, if we look at the majority of literature on gender and climate change, we often find a very narrow interpretation of what gender equality and women’s rights mean in the context of