

Conflict, Gender and Climate Change in the Arab Region

Pedro Muñoz Alonso*, Thursday 29 Sep 2016

Gender equality, or the lack of it, is not a stand-alone issue. Social, economic and environmental factors all affect the degree of balance between men and women. That is especially so in the Arab region, ravaged by war and wracked by climate change. The question is: how do those factors interact with gender concerns?

Some experiences in the Arab region show that climate change factors intersect with the socioeconomic and political realms and contribute to conflicts. Such is the case of the Sudan's conflict in Darfur, in which water scarcity and a decline in rainfall were the basis of considering it the first climate change conflict by the UN. Syria suffered from intense droughts between 2006 and 2011, increasing the migration flow from rural to urban areas and reduced access and availability to resources. Similar protests occurred in Egypt in 2010 and 2011, when climate-related factors encouraged China to import exceptionally significant amounts of wheat, producing imbalances in the market and making it unaffordable for Egyptians.

The intersection between conflicts and climate change in the Arab region occurs in the opposite direction too. Conflicts aggravate the impact of climate change since fights compromise environmental resources, affecting the well-being of the population. A case in point is the conflict in Yemen, where clashes have obstructed access to clean water to 20 million people and resulted in the death of around 4,000 people. Reduced access to water aggravates in occupation contexts, such as in the Palestinian case where around 200,000 Palestinians have no access to water and are subsequently unable to cultivate and secure livelihoods.

All this is framed within a context where previous gender imbalances expose women to a disproportionate impact of the intersection between conflict and climate change in the region. This holds especially true given the shift in gender roles produced in conflict settings, where women assume not only the reproductive, but also the productive work, becoming the head of households. Such condition adds on their exposure to vulnerability, especially in terms of limiting their access to land, assets, credit, water and livelihoods,

The ESCWA Policy Brief on Conflict and Climate Change: Mutually Reinforcing Impact on Gender Imbalances in the Arab Region analyses how conflicts and climate change influence each other and proves that women are at the centre of the intersection of both elements, being disproportionately affected. The brief demonstrates that structural gender inequalities perpetuate in times of war and proves the relevance of an effective increase of women's participation in decision-making in such contexts.

The policy brief shows the need to integrate a gender perspective in all stages of the public policy cycle to alleviate the impact of climate change and conflicts. Conducting a gender analysis and impact assessment is vital to ensuring that everyone's basic needs are met. This can be done by considering women both target and beneficiaries of the relevant environment policies. Yet, no progress can be achieved without tackling the structural multi-dimensional gender gap in the region. The policy brief shows that closing the gender gap between men and women is not only important for an improved general wellbeing in conflict settings, but also to tackle the root causes and mitigate the likelihood for conflict outbreaks in the Arab region.

***Pedro Muñoz Alonso is the Associate Social Affairs Officer at the Centre for Women of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.**