

Gender Dimensions of Livelihood Security in Dryland Areas of China

There is limited understanding of issues at the intersection of environmental and climate change, livelihoods and gender, with little sex disaggregated data or gendered analysis of problems and impacts, or capacity to undertake such work. Overall, ecological and climate-related issues are more likely to be seen as problems caused in part by human action, but requiring technical solutions that often neglect household livelihood strategies. These are the findings of a scoping study carried out UNRISD together with the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP) and other Chinese partners.

The Context

It is widely recognized that China faces severe environmental constraints, with the deteriorating quality and quantity of water and land among the key factors affecting both rural and urban populations. These problems arise both in the wider context of climate change, as well as from the environmental burden of China's rapid economic and social transformations. Particularly affected are the rural poor and populations located in the dryland areas that cover approximately 40 percent of China, mainly in the country's north and northwest, but with impacts—particularly related to climate change-induced variability—now extending further south. The impacted areas are heterogeneous in terms of agro-ecological zones, livelihood systems and ethnic groups. Women commonly face additional and intersecting forms of

disadvantage across multiple dimensions. But there is little research available on the gender dimensions of environmentally induced livelihood insecurities in dryland areas.

An initial review of the international literature identified two critical knowledge gaps. First, China is relatively absent from the global and development literatures on this topic, despite extensive dryland regions and pastoralist populations within the country and the recognized problem of unsustainable water use. Second, internationally as well as in China, the gender dimensions of the problem, including the often problematic gendered impacts of proposed interventions and solutions, are relatively neglected in research, analysis and policy.

The Chinese leadership is giving increased attention to social development and to environmental protection, as well as the relationship between them. As such, addressing the negative environmental and social impacts of rapid growth and urbanization, in particular problems of air pollution, water, food security, transport and housing, as well as social unrest, are high on the government's policy agenda as seen in the current Five Year Plan and the Central Government's No. 1 documents for 2014 and 2015. These same issues are also attracting the attention of international actors (Asian Development Bank/ADB, United Nations Development Programme/UNDP and the United Nations Environment Programme/UNEP).

Findings of the Scoping Study

A broad initial mapping sought to locate the ideas, policies and practices coming from

About the Project

This UNRISD Issue Brief is based on the findings of a scoping study on the gender dimensions of livelihood security in dryland areas of China, funded by the Ford Foundation Beijing Office and undertaken by UNRISD together with the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP) and other Chinese partners in 2014.

The study entailed a review of the literature in Chinese and in English, and interviews with experts and with households living in dryland areas of China. Experts were convened at a workshop on 16 December 2014 in Beijing, where the results of the scoping study were discussed and policy/research recommendations outlined. See www.unrisd.org/gender-drylands.



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the central state, as well as those arising from social relations and practices on the ground identified through ethnographic or participatory research and the activities of local organizations.

This review found a strong state discourse that portrays the western regions of China as underdeveloped and impoverished, with practices—often associated with different ethnic groups and with livelihood practices (such as pastoralism)—presented as the cause of impoverishment and environmental degradation. Interventions (state policies and programmes) to address this interpretation of the “problem” thus include technological solutions to improve the efficiency of water use; shifting land use patterns from common property to individual tenure systems; and environmental protection and ecological resettlement, coupled with education programmes.

The review also found that researchers who pursue more ethnographic or action-oriented research tend to view problems facing dryland populations from the perspective of the people that inhabit these regions. As a result, the “problem” is often seen to originate in the intervention of external actors, and emphasis is placed on the importance of local knowledge and capacities in finding productive and sustainable solutions to dryland development challenges. Despite this bottom-up perspective, gender issues are often neglected.

Overall, very little gendered analysis was found—whether of local-level perspectives, water insecurity and climate variability, or in state or NGO programmes and interventions.

The scoping study also sought to delve in greater depth into the links between climate change and gender (acknowledging a general lack of attention to the gender dimensions of climate change impacts). There is a large body of work showing the impact of climate change in China, including in areas such as water and food security, but it remains largely focused on production issues (crop yields, ecological adaptation) rather than on human or social impacts and adaptation. Some sources recognize that women are often more highly dependent on natural resources than men, more vulnerable to climate related impacts, and with less capacity or knowledge for adaptation and resilience. Within China, however, little detailed analysis has been undertaken on these questions.

The scoping study identified a number of significant gaps in understanding, data, knowledge and analysis.

Women’s access to land and natural resources

While there is a significant literature on this issue in China, it is primarily in the context of settled agricultural systems and has not addressed contexts of pastoral land or common property resources. The gendered implications of resettlement and enclosure policies remain largely unexplored; analysis of the implications for women where they have primary responsibility for the provision of fuel and water, and their access to other resources, is limited.

Gender division of labour, employment and migration

Shifts in livelihood activities, settlement, mobility or employment are often associated with either the impacts of environmental change and land degradation, or with the policy responses (such as ecological resettlement programmes). Little analysis was found of the specific impacts on women of such changes.

Social reproduction and education

A range of livelihood issues related to care and household work (responsibility for fuel and water, for example), health implications, and resettlement and education policies which may strain family relations or result in family separation and rising divorce rates, were identified from local information but with little systematic research and evidence available.

Community management and governance

The strains of environmental change and the policy responses (resettlement, exclusion from common property resources) were identified as undermining community-level and informal support mechanisms, as well as community resources, on which women are often particularly dependent. At the same time, women were found to be largely excluded from the local governance processes where decisions about and governance over such resources were taken.

Lack of data

The scoping study found wide knowledge gaps and an overall lack of data. Though knowledge

is available from those working at the grassroots and from some “grey” literature, it is difficult to access. The robust and comprehensive data that are a prerequisite for policy, intervention and academic research are lacking.

Lack of gender assessments in major government initiatives

China has experience with large-scale programmes to combat deforestation and desertification, for ecological resettlement, and for irrigation, as well as compensatory social programmes for populations affected by environmental problems and policies (such as the “grain for green” programme). It also has an approach to integrated environmental planning within Agenda 21. However, there is limited if any integration of gender into these major policy debates or programme implementation. The All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) is generally seen as the responsible agency for women, but it has limited capacity or voice in such interventions.

Women’s capacity to respond to climate-related changes or disasters, and to participate in related policy processes

State policies overwhelmingly fail to consider a gender perspective. There is limited sex disaggregated data on issues such as disaster impacts, and generally an absence of social or gender impact assessments or evaluations of policies and interventions from a gender perspective. The focus on technological issues and technical solutions needs to be redressed in order to ensure due attention to the social domains and policies that particularly affect women and by extension families and their livelihoods.

Workshop

To conclude and share the findings of the scoping study, UNRISD and CCAP convened an expert workshop in Beijing in December 2014 that brought together researchers and practitioners. The following critical points emerged or were emphasized during the workshop.

- **Land rights:** There is a lack of attention to women’s common property land use/rights and the implications of policies of individual tenure. In other countries, women have been found to play a significant role in environmental protection when they have stable land rights. In China, there is little

understanding of how women’s rights are considered or protected when common property land is allocated to households. Similarly there is little consideration of these issues at the community level, and over common property resources, despite women’s often important role in their management.

- **Social and gendered impacts of policies:** Policies in response to over-grazing and grassland degradation are found to have impacts on families, potentially leading to family separation and rising divorce rates. Similarly education policies / school consolidation leading to children attending boarding schools has also resulted in family separation, often with mothers relocating to urban areas to be close to children in school, with implications for income and livelihoods.
- **Health:** Ecological and health problems are closely related, through channels such as water use/access, shifts in employment and changes in diet; and these often have particularly severe impacts on women’s health. In Gansu, high rates of gynaecological disease are linked to water shortage and related problems of sanitation; women have less access to information or understanding of how environmental changes and diet affect health. However, gender dimensions remain largely ignored in analyses and reports.
- **Limited sex-disaggregated data:** Growing awareness of the impacts of climate-related disasters, and the variation in impacts within groups (by income or access to land), was noted but with little available data or analysis disaggregated by sex.
- **Local governance:** Women tend not to be engaged in community leadership or in production organizations (the example of cooperatives in Inner Mongolia was given). With regard to local governance more broadly, work on community-level adaptation or mitigation strategies rarely reflects gender issues, nor are women often considered as community leaders in such discussions.
- **A range of new initiatives, interventions and opportunities,** whether promoted by central or local government or NGOs, were also noted by participants.

Directions for Further Research and Programming

Key points of consensus both from the scoping study and the workshop were that there is limited gendered understanding of

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issues at the intersection of environmental and climate change, livelihoods and gender, with little sex disaggregated data or gendered analysis of problems and impacts, or capacity to undertake such work. Overall, ecological and climate-related issues are more likely to be seen as problems caused in part by human action, but requiring technical solutions that often neglect household livelihood strategies.

Women's issues, as the domain of the ACWF or related women's organizations, are rarely seen as a concern by mainstream government agencies, or in many cases even by NGOs working on other issues. Where women's issues have been more visible in policy debates around reform agendas, such as in the debates on land rights, these have tended to neglect pastoral land or common property resources essential to livelihoods in dryland areas. Furthermore, policy issues relating to the environment, water and food security, and land allocation are generally addressed through a lens of concern about the environment and economic productivity, largely ignoring the social dimensions, household and community relations, social reproduction and gender.

As a result, surveys and research on production, economic activities, and climate-related issues rarely include questions related to gender or women-specific activities and impacts, while deeper analysis of changes in gender relations, social norms and behaviour around women and men's work and well-being are not available.

Overall, the results of the scoping study and workshop discussions point both to areas of future research as well to processes of capacity building and awareness raising around the issues. All of the issues highlighted above require further research: a large and systematic effort to address gaps would involve:

- Field studies in multiple regions, ideally on a comparative basis, to collect sex-disaggregated data on links between environmental change, production, social reproduction and the gender division of labour, and well-being outcomes.
- Development of methodologies to incorporate gendered analysis into impact assessments of major ecological programmes in China, or the undertaking of separate impact assessments.
- Data collection and in-depth analysis of the gender dimensions of environmental change, policy interventions and wider effects on society.
- Training and capacity building, including of young researchers and members of the NGO and policy communities, to raise awareness of gender issues and strengthen capacities to undertake research and analysis from a gender perspective.

Finally, some key entry points for future research included: water security; health; food and nutrition security, preparation and changing diets; women's rights and access to land and natural resources; household structure, separation and breakdown; and women's participation in local governance and community management.

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