Writing...
FACTS, OPINIONS & IDEAS

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Climate Change: It's a 'People' Thing and it Discriminates

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> It's a fact: climate change affects women and men differently.[1]
>
> … children bear the brunt of the impact of climate change.[2]

Introduction

Much of our agricultural land is presently straining under the 'worst drought in living memory': 80% of Queensland is drought declared. This drought comes upon the heels of the Millennium Drought, the *longest* drought in the living memory of those who colonised this country. Stocking rates are down and impacts will continue to be felt as any debt to restock will be heavy when it rains. Markets have been distorted. Towns and communities are affected. Nature and humanity are distressed.

Under climate change projections, when our problem isn't drought, we may find ourselves dealing with extreme frosts and hail in or out of season. Crops will be damaged, agricultural economies affected, and human health will suffer.[3]

Many people, old and young, rich and poor, in towns and cities across the country have already been affected in recent years by

shocking flood events. Infrastructure has been damaged, personal property lost and flood insurance to offset these implications has become increasingly difficult to obtain. More painfully, people have lost their lives as well as families, their livelihoods.

It is increasingly clear that the impacts of climate change cascade across regions, personal and professional interests, and sectors. A natural disaster kills people, makes people homeless, renders them sick and concomitantly imposes crushing obligations on health services, destroys crops, undermines economies, damages infrastructure, impacts service provision, breaks down codes of practice in respect of insurance, and potentially erodes cultural and social norms.

In Australia we are already witnessing the human impact of extreme events that can be attributed to climate change. In the week preceding the devastating 173 deaths and the property loss associated with the 2009 Victorian bushfires, it was estimated 374 people had their deaths hastened by the record-breaking heatwave conditions.

Fires backed by winds of up to 100 km per hour steamed up the ranges and poured out across the flats just north of Melbourne in early February 2009. A week of heatwave — days above 40 degrees — provided insights into the new climate change reality. The 7th February was the hottest day on record — 46.4 degrees in Melbourne. Fires erupted in 14 different places (in 316 grass, scrub and forest fires), and 350,000ha were burned. Quite apart from fatalities, it is alarming to know that 414 people presented injured to hospital emergency departments in the first 72 hours of this heatwave and fire emergency.[4]

Climate change *is* not well understood as a human rights issue

Climate change, manifesting as a fire event of epic proportions, clearly has an impact on human rights: the right to life, the right to health, the right to property, the right to housing and security. For

many young people, these conditions had an impact on their right to family supports, and to education as well as to health.

When the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) submitted to the subsequent Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission it did so in terms which referenced human rights impacts — relief and recovery, mental health and wellbeing, material aid, accommodation and community engagement. But, oddly, VCOSS did not specifically describe these issues in human rights terms.[5] Further, the coordinated legal response to these events was about access to legal services, not breaches of human rights. A Legal 1800 Help Line provided advice and referrals, and resource and information kits were delivered to lawyers. Advice was provided at relief centres, and a Bushfire Insurance Unit was established.[6]

Finally, the Bushfire Royal Commission Report talked about 'needs' and 'safety', but not human rights. Recommendations gave 'priority to protecting human life' and were designed to minimise tragedy in the future, but climate change 'violation' of human rights did not feature in the discussion.[7] There were only two references to climate change in the final report. As this impact was felt, our business-as-usual disaster-funding arrangements were already stretched.

On another front, and reflecting this notable but frequently unremarked absence, 2013 saw Australian drought relief programs also fail to reference climate change or human rights impacts. The Intergovernmental Agreement on National Drought Progressive Reform in 2013 (to run from 2014–2018) was established to 'help farmers manage risk and prepare for future challenges'. One of its objectives was to help primary producers to 'prepare for the impacts of increased *climate variability*' (my italics). This suggests that sometimes crushing and always significant changes to our climate are actually simply 'natural', not human induced and, like most natural processes, they will self-correct. Human rights implications are not part of the reworked drought relief formula even as dire peer-reviewed climate change projections have firmed.[8]

Climate change is a human rights issue

It is against this backdrop that we need to consider climate change as having more than environmental implications. Remarkably, our failure to conceive of climate change as a human rights issue flies in the face of the growth of scholarship that observes the link, even if it is not capable of being litigated (at present).[9]

Our historical and cultural understanding of extreme events, intensely practical, concerned with risk and its management, has lacked a human rights lens. We think of disasters as events that can be addressed with remedies such as 'drought assistance', 'flood relief' and 'bushfire assistance packages'. These are administrative solutions designed for environmental problems and economic outcomes.

Human rights to life, security, health and shelter were all affected by the 2009 fires in Victoria, but we didn't conceive of those events in that way. In a way, our response was routinised, similar to but different in degree, to that of a Mexican woman confronting climate change impacts on her livelihood:

> My friends and I were sitting yesterday in the plaza talking about our crop losses and had a good laugh. One friend said with a smile, 'I have insurance'. Another friend replied, 'I have insurance too', and then I joined in and said 'I have insurance too — I have the assurance that when I die I will be carried down this street right here, on the way to the cemetery, over there.[10]

Climate change is a problem across many human dimensions and it will adversely affect us — our human rights — even in the face of this sort of stoicism.

It is instructive to look at how the human rights climate change nexus is playing out in other regions. This does not always appear to be 'environmental' and the implications are highly discriminatory.

Impacts – conflicts, climate change, human rights

The world has witnessed unparalleled refugee movements in 2015 as Syria has imploded. Few people understand this crisis to have its genesis in climate change.[11] It is, however, increasingly clear that climate produced the acute weather conditions that prompted drought, crop failure and food shortages in the region, and this in turn eroded food security[12] and destabilised markets.[13] Population shifts occurred as a result, and conflict over resources — housing, food, water — followed.[14]

Conservative, level-headed army and navy leaders tell us that our security and world security will come under strain.[15] Mass migration and the disorderly displacement of vulnerable people is to be expected, not just across land borders.[16] Asia is already demonstrating a particular vulnerability to displacement in the wake of natural disasters.[17]

As the Syrian crisis and its concomitant mass migrations unfolds *acutely,* we also know that countries like Bangladesh are *chronically* intensely vulnerable to flooding and extreme events, all of which are 'environmental' and increasingly driven by climate change.

Both of these scenarios have caused massive human and environmental displacement. In doing so, both have an impact on human rights, particularly (as we shall see) the rights of women and girl children.[18]

By 2050, the Asian Development Bank estimates at least 35 million Bangladeshis will be dislocated as a result of climate change events.[19] Today, 2.2 billion children already contend with impacts and by 2050 'an estimated 25 million more children will be undernourished as a result of climate change'.[20]

The rights that will be affected by climate change

Rights affected by climate change, if not legally 'violated' and open to litigated remedies, will intersect and be extensive, and they will

include, at the extremes, the right to life.[21] Associated with this, the right to security will be undermined by all the factors that promote mass human migration and the conflict that subsequently occurs.[22]

The right to adequate food, recognised in the International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights as a legitimate entitlement, is recognised as already undermined.[23] The right to water, a women's right as a function of the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women is plainly affected as water vulnerability will be heightened by drier conditions and population growth and shifts.[24]

Climate change will have an impact on the right to health and the right to food, as protected under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.[25] Health is a fundamental right, protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[26] Changes in climate will produce new environments in which new diseases will flourish.[27] It is already suggested by the World Health Organisation that over the last 30 years, climate change has started to take its toll on lives, killing 150,000 people annually.[28]

The Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) will also be infringed by climate change impacts. Connection to country will become more tenuous due to harsher conditions playing out in already fragile landscapes and by the movement of others into some regions. Already vulnerable and often subject to less secure living conditions than other Australians Aboriginal people will continue to be disproportionately affected.[29]

Women in developing country settings – discrimination, resistance and opportunities

The *2009 UN Population Fund Annual Report* made the point that 'women are the hardest hit' by a range of destabilising changes even as they evince high levels of resilience and are integral to family and community decision-making about adjustments and adaptation to drought, flood and extreme events.

Women's rights are human rights, and significant interventions in support of women have taken place because of the importance of their well understood role in community development and family stability.[30] Women's rights are clearly considered in the discussion about the Sustainable Development Goals. Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 deals with Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable Development. Against the historical backdrop of omission in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) — up until Conference of the Parties (COP) 18 — gender is a focal point in the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction, 2005). The Framework insists a gendered perspective should be integrated into disaster risk management policies, plans, decision-making processes, early warning strategies, information management and education and training.

Reflecting the COP18 omission the elevation of climate change as a women's rights issue is occurring against some cultural, social and structural obstructions. For example, in developing grass-roots climate change advocacy in India, Usha Nair candidly reported that there was 'an acute lack of awareness' about climate change and its implications among those most affected.[31] Out of multi-stakeholder consultations in South Africa, Dorah Marema found the usual issues — implementation takes time and is hard work and that for best effect negotiators should be lobbied 'at home'.[32] Marema also formed the view that climate change is often understood as a 'technical' (i.e. masculine), not a social or women's (non-technical) issue. Eco-feminists are no doubt working on this issue as climate change and culture scholarship grows.

The *2009 UN Population Report* tells us that 63% of rural households rely on women to obtain drinking water. In the Sub Sahara women grow 60–80% of the food consumed and spend 40 billion hours a year collecting water (an estimate). In Asia, 50% of women grow between 50–90% of the rice. Their livelihoods are affected by extreme events, but the story is complicated.

Outcomes observed as a function of climate impacts include less time for girls' schooling, the reinforcement of the poverty cycle and less access to family planning.

Climate change impacts cascade through social structures, continuing to impact women. For instance, the 'tropical glaciers' in Bolivia on the slopes of the Huayna Potosi and Chacaltaya mountains are melting and retreating at three times the previously anticipated rate, and they are fundamental to people's ways of life. Women in their seventies and girls who should be in school are now undertaking the farming work as men work away in towns. Less water is available, and it takes the women and girls longer to access it. Beyond those rural outcomes, the capital La Paz and the tourism economy will all be affected. As tourists are affected by having to look for other places to ski, local women and girls will continue to trail up and down the valleys, hauling water longer and longer distances, having their rights to health, food, security and education traduced.

Collection of firewood and providing for families is also already at stress levels for women in developing countries. In Senegal, rainfall has dropped by 35% since 1996. It has been observed that women 'are very tired' (Kalom village). Women burn articles of furniture to cook (Gadiag village). Wells are empty when they are reached, land is untended, money is scarce, the necessary reforestation is impossible. Human rights to health, food, and family life are all compromised by these changes in climate.

The London School of Economics, University of Essex and Max Planck Institute examined data from 141 countries and formed the following conclusions about the impact of extreme events and discriminatory outcomes on the human rights of women and girls:[33]

- Boys were given preferential treatment at rescue. In Sri Lanka, boys survived a recent tsunami because they were taught to swim. Girls were not taught to swim and did not survive.

- Women and girls suffer more from shortages of food (particularly if breastfeeding or there are food hierarchies).
- Women will often avoid using shelters because they find themselves exposed to sexual and physical violence.
- Women's reduced access to food results in greater vulnerability to disease, which is itself elevated in times of floods.
- 'Natural' disasters lower life expectancy of women more than men.
- Women, boys and girls are 14 times more likely to die during a disaster than are men.
- In Pakistan during the 1995 cyclone disasters in Bangladesh, 90% of the 140,000 people who died were women.
- In the French heatwaves of 2003, most of the deaths were of elderly women.
- In times of drought, women spend even more of their time and energy on locating and drawing water — up to 85% of their time.
- As women make up a vast proportion of the agricultural labour in any developing country, changes to rainfall patterns and other climate change impacts result in them losing their means of support.
- Most of those trapped in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the United States were African American women and children; further, more than 90,000 people affected by that hurricane earned less than $10,000 annually; more than 40% of the children were living below the poverty line; and more than 59% of those African American households affected lacked a vehicle and people could not self-help to evacuate.
- More than 70% of the dead from the 2004 Asian Tsunami were women.

- In the 2008 Myanmar cyclone Nargis, 100% of married women lost their main source of income as did 87% of unmarried women.
- In Banda Aceh during the tsunami, in the worst affected village of Kuala Cangkoy, 80% of all deaths were of women.

It was concluded that the more devastating the disaster, the more elevated is the effect on the gender gap on life expectancies, but it was noted that this differential is weakened as women go up in socio-economic status.

As up to 70% of those living beneath the poverty line are women, they are already vulnerable and their human rights are further compromised in the circumstances, as outlined above. Poor women are particularly vulnerable to climate change and extreme events. They are affected by conflicts over food and fuel, and they have fewer adaptive capacities and are more dependent on climate sensitive resources (water and food sources).

Beyond simple poverty indicators, women's socially constructed roles and reproductive tasks and their work as carers (across generations) increases their vulnerability.[34] Women are often prevented from engaging in voluntary migration owing to socio-cultural norms and caregiving responsibilities. They can be less mobile and confined to homes more generally, and they often have less decision-making power.

It may not even be possible for women to clamber out of this situation. Obstacles can:

- be structural
- be financial — including the lack of assets and resources
- reflect the lack of safe land and shelter
- be limited access to material and financial resources
- echo a lack of relevant skills and knowledge
- reflect the high prices of agricultural inputs and materials
- be an expression of cultural barriers including taboos.

This is not to say there is not scope to change this gender bias without resorting to litigation to protect human rights. If we consider climate change implications through a human rights lens, recognise that women are more deleteriously affected, and make provision to resolve this in the early stages of planning, there are real improvements to be had without reverting to the command and control methodologies of the legal process.

Women can play leading roles in adaptation and also mitigation.[35] In developing countries some responses do not have to be expensive or complex. For instance, women's status might improve by adopting the following actions — some simple, some more formal and organisational:

- farming ducks instead of chickens in flood prone areas
- moving to higher ground and elevating shelters
- storing seeds against the possibility of loss
- moving livestock proactively
- consuming more traditional foods
- engaging in energy saving with biogas and stove changes, reducing dependence upon foraging for wood
- switching crops
- intercropping and diversifying
- changing irrigation practices
- using traditional medicines
- organising collective action.[36]

Addressing the aftermath and being proactive for future eventualities, after Hurricane Mitch women became actively involved in the housing reconstruction in Guatemala and Honduras in 1998.[37] In Pintadas, Brazil, it was agricultural women's active participation and insights that resulted in irrigation improvements as both an adaptation and mitigation strategy to climate change eventualities. Working to mitigate climate change, in Mali it was

women who collected the firewood that changed the manner in which that collection was impoverishing the environment. In India, in Dasholi Gran Samaj Mandal, women's input has actually arrested deforestation over 32 years.

In developed countries, respect for women's human rights as participants will also implicitly improve outcomes. Beyond the simple but nevertheless potentially difficult steps outlined above, it is apparent that where women have been involved in decision making and strategic planning the achievements are evident. Their participation, inclusion, and representation are recognised human rights, and in the contexts outlined above, clearly link with climate change issues. When we recognise the role of women in production, it is clear their contributions can help to reduce impacts, respond to events, and both mitigate and promote adaptation to climate change.

Children

The situation of children is more concerning and their capacity to adjust or adapt are much more limited. Young people are exposed, climate change will discriminate, and they have less ability to react and take charge of their circumstances than do women and other adults.

The right of children to life[38] *requires* states to take positive measures.[39] The range of children's rights is wide and includes: the right to health, water, food, housing, parental care, education, play, leisure, access to culture, participation, accountability and non-discrimination. Climate change, through the slow, grinding impacts of droughts, the urgency of flood events, or conflict (linked or otherwise), will have an impact on every one of these rights.

It is suggested that adolescents, and in particular adolescent girls, will be adversely affected and deal with these issues differently from younger children and boys. Shifts in population and the associated breakdown of the family unit will leave this group open

to sexual predation. They will also struggle to maintain themselves later in their lives due to their lack of ongoing access to schooling, as their capacity to access education will be reduced by the need to earn a living in shifting circumstances.[40] Children are particularly vulnerable to being co-opted into militia in circumstances of conflict.

Doctors for the Environment have recently reported on the implications of climate change for children's health and therefore their human rights.[41] WHO has already concluded that more than 88% of the existing global burden of disease owing to climate change falls on children under the age of 5.[42] Citing this and other work, it can be said with authority that 'striking socio-economic inequalities … are exacerbated by climate change', particularly when it comes to children's rights.[43]

As a general proposition, children are extremely vulnerable, physically. Children's behaviour — the way they play and where they play — further exposes them to adverse impacts. Their bodies respond differently to extreme events. They suffer from extreme heat events, and health impacts can include asthma, fever, gastro, and electrolyte imbalances. Heat stroke is, in fact, a medical emergency and has a death rate across the population of 33%. In and after flood events, children are vulnerable to all the diseases that dirty water promotes, including vector-borne disease.

Children's mental health is also affected by extreme events and disasters. Post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disturbances, aggressive behaviour, sadness and substance abuse are all observed to be elevated. In Australia, after the Canberra bushfires in 2003, there was a noticeable increase in PTSD in children, more so than with adults.

Children's human right to health, parental comfort and family supports are all affected by extreme events.

Others and us

Here in our country, where we are presently relatively well insulated from some of these outcomes, we rarely discuss the implications of climate change on human rights. However, in a range of ways, we are not immune, and our actions or inaction implicitly exacerbate the problems even as senior members of our community urge us to remain complacent.

In recent times, the Australian Human Rights Commission report on the *Forgotten Children National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014* recorded the voices of a small band of children in transit from homelands. Reasons given for fleeing countries of origin ranged from fear, persecution, statelessness, religious persecution and then war.

A Syrian child said: '… my country has war, that's why I'm here. If my country was good I don't need Australia.' (p. 52)

A woman commented: '…We came here from war and were hoping for freedom here. My own country never locked me up. Here there are women's rights but we are locked up .' (p. 69)

A 13-year-old said: '… Boat number has become like our first name.' (p. 73)

A specialist paediatrician provided this professional insight: '… The mask and gag of the profound depression we saw in so many desperate young mothers will disrupt the mother-child bond, with lasting adverse impacts on development and mental health of their children (p. 88).'

These children are dislocated owing to war and violence, which is itself interconnected with and also driven by climate change. As climate change drives environmental change and degradation — droughts, water scarcity and crop failure — people will move. They will do so without 'permits', in disorderly ways, ignoring national and international strictures. Children who are stateless, in a permanent state of PTSD or similar, will become a permanent reminder of our inaction on climate change and many of them will probably never recover from their in-transit experiences.

Conclusion

As we headed into the COP21 Paris Talks, Australia continued to be an outlier in respect of serious climate change action. There is something really odd about the position we are adopting. We seem to think that we are insulated from the changes that will be wrought on the landscape in which we live, on the flora and fauna and environment upon which we depend, and upon the local and global community.

The Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change tells us that with '0.85°C warming, many anticipated threats have already become real-world impacts'.[44] On top of this, impacts may well become 'non-linear'. Tipping points, if reached, will render all discussion about measured responses and planned adaptation nugatory.

It is arguable that the failure to link climate change, environmental outcomes and social, cultural and human rights is producing cognitive dissonance. Is our lack of interest connected to our knowledge that it will be the vulnerable, not us, who are affected?

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