

# Climate Change Policies in Australia: Gender Equality, Power and Knowledge

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**Abstract**—This paper examines the link between gender equality and climate change policies in Australia. It critically analyses the extent to which gender mainstreaming and gender dimensions have been taken into account in the national policy processes for climate change in Australia. The paper argues that climate change adaptation and mitigation policies in Australia neglect gender dimensions. This endangers the advances made in gender equality and works against socially equitable and effective climate change strategies.

**Keywords**—Climate change, gender equality, gender mainstreaming, sustainable development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IT is projected that the global environmental issue of climate change has adverse impacts on livelihoods and human security as it can impede progress for sustainable human and social development. The issue of gender and gender equality is central in this context. The international community has acknowledged the importance of gender equality and empowerment of women as one of its Millennium Development Goals (MDG 3). Gender equality is seen as critical for the achievement of sustainable development, and an essential prerequisite for achieving all other MDGs such as global poverty eradication, and ensuring environmental sustainability [24], [32], [39], [41]. As the United Nations Environment Programme states, “gender equality and equity are prerequisites to poverty eradication and sustainable development” [39, p.3]. Gender mainstreaming has emerged world-wide as the key strategy to achieve gender equality, and as a critical component for realising national sustainable development goals. The UN’s Commission on the Status of Women, for example, has stated that all governments “should be encouraged to mainstream gender perspectives into their national policies, action plans and other measures on sustainable development and climate change” [34, p. 3]. This paper is about the extent of gender mainstreaming approaches in Australia’s climate change policies.

A recent CSIRO report [10] identified a number of possible outcomes of climate change for Australia, such as more heatwaves and fewer frosts, reductions in rainfalls, and changes of coastal zones through sea level rise and change in ocean currents. These ecological changes have major social and economic implications for Australia, as the Government

commissioned Garnaut Report [10] highlighted. Adaptation to climate change is predominantly a social issue in which gender plays a significant part. But gender also plays a major role in mitigation strategies with women and men having different uses of energy and hence contributions to global warming. It can be said that the causes, effects and solutions to climate change are gendered [29]. Climate change will affect men and women differently with women and the poor seen as the most vulnerable [5], [22]. The important role of gender in policy responses to climate change is increasingly recognized [8], [9], [12], [25], [26]. Adaptation and mitigation policies are thus linked to gender equality for its effectiveness, and need to take gender dimensions into account so that advances in gender equality are not lost in the process of responding to the challenges of climate change.

This paper analyses whether Australia’s climate change policies are gender sensitive and include gender equality as a major goal. The paper critically examines the relevant policy documents of climate change in Australia, such as the National Climate Change Adaptation Framework, the National Climate Change Adaptation Programme, as well as research and working papers that inform the policy process in the context of climate change. It starts with a brief introduction of the link between gender equality and climate change and the role of gender mainstreaming. It then discusses climate change policies and gender mainstreaming in Australia.

## II. GENDER EQUALITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE: GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Gender refers to the socially constructed identities, roles and expectations of men and women. Gender relations between men and women are ultimately power relations which are historically and culturally specific and which disadvantage women by reinforcing and perpetuating the unequal gender roles and relations. Gender equality does not mean that women and men will be same but that both have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration in policy making, and that the diversity among different groups of women and men is taken into account [16, p. 36]. Gender equality between women and men is thus a precondition for sustainable human and social development.

Gender is an important dimension in understanding environmental change and achieving sustainable development

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in the context of climate change. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states in its section on sustainability and equity “climate change impacts will be differently distributed among different regions, generations, age classes, income group, occupations and *genders*” [21, p. 680, emphasis added]. The report goes on to emphasise that these different vulnerabilities have major sustainability and equity implications as poorer regions and nations have less capacities to adapt to climate change and in general that “climate change without appropriate policies of response may lead to greater inequity” [21, p. 681]. In regard to gender, this means that gender insensitive climate change policies could increase gender inequality and thus undermine efforts for achieving MDG 3.

Climate change has many gender-specific characteristics such as women being affected differently, and more severely, by climate change and natural disasters than men because of their social roles, discrimination and poverty, and women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making about climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. As the Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook shows as one key gender difference: “women are still absent from the climate change and natural resource-related decision-making processes at all levels [42, pp. 425-426]. What is required for effective adaptation and mitigation strategies to climate change is the integration or ‘mainstreaming’ of gender into all policies, programs and projects. The use of gender analysis and gender equality indicators is useful to identify the vulnerabilities to climate change of men and women, and how climate change impacts on gender relations.

It is expected that climate change will exacerbate current gender inequalities with women becoming even more disadvantaged because they are the most vulnerable in developing and developed countries [25], [26]. The call is therefore to intensify the efforts nationally and internationally to mainstream gender in climate change adaptation [9] [27]. Gender mainstreaming has been defined by the UN Economic and Social Council [37] in the following way:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality.

Although gender mainstreaming has been the approach to achieve gender equality for over 20 years, there has been limited success [1], [28]. The new Gender Action Plan of the United Nations Environment Programme alerts that the little progress which has been achieved is in danger of reversal and highlights that the environment sector in particular “is among those in which gender mainstreaming has taken place in a fragmented, superficial and inconsistent manner [and that] environmental policies that do take gender into account have

only been partially implemented [39, p. 4]. The major reason for the limited success of gender mainstreaming is that gender is rarely central to policy issues within societies and organisation at local, national and international levels. There are many issues that can prevent effective gender mainstreaming, such as a hostile and indifferent culture of institutions, the ‘ghettoization’ of gender in policy approaches, the unavailability or inadequacy of sex-disaggregated data, and the failure to connect gender mainstreaming efforts to broader political, social, economic and environmental realities [30, p.21].

An important instrument in gender mainstreaming approaches is gender analysis which helps to understand the socially constructed roles of men and women and how they shape social processes and relations. Gender-based analysis challenges the assumption that everyone is affected by policies and programs in the same way regardless of their gender. Gender analysis is critical in overcoming gender bias or gender blindness in policy making. Gender capacity building is another plank of gender mainstreaming approaches. Strengthening the capacity of women to be their own agents of change and to be involved in environmental governance is essential to overcome gender inequalities. Gender capacity building is very much about education and gender awareness training in organisations and government agencies in order to create the public space and possibilities for the inclusion of gender issues into decision-making [33], [39].

Gender mainstreaming approaches are shaped by the dominant power and knowledge relations in society. One reason of the limited success of gender mainstreaming approaches nationally and internationally is that gender is to be ‘mainstreamed’ into the patriarchal power and knowledge structures of modern capitalist societies which reinforce and perpetuate unequal gender relations. Integrating or mainstreaming gender into ‘male-stream’ societies is flawed. Achieving gender equality is naturally about breaking down patriarchal structures and hegemonic masculinities which discriminate and disadvantage women. Gender mainstreaming is thus problematic as long as unequal power relations between genders are not dismantled and gender maintains to be equated with women and women’s empowerment.

### III. GENDERED KNOWLEDGE, EMPOWERMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

This section briefly discusses the central importance of gendered knowledge and empowerment of men and women for effective and equitable climate change policies.

Men and women have different roles, responsibilities, and knowledge in managing natural resources. Local knowledge of men and women about local biodiversity and local ecological systems is a central asset for securing the livelihood of poor rural women and men [42, p. 432]. Such knowledge, in particular women’s knowledge about maintaining biodiversity, is critical to adapting to climate change more effectively. As stated by the UN Commission on the Status of Women, “women have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies” but the ability of women “to contribute their unique and valuable perspectives

and expertise on climate change” is impeded by their lack of representation in decision-making on natural resource management and sustainable development which includes climate change [34, pp. 2-3]. Women are important agents of change in achieving climate change objectives in regard to adaptation and mitigation [23].

Gendered knowledge and empowerment of women are shaped by relations of power and the cultural context. How much gender equality and women’s empowerment are part and parcel of policy-making is determined by the structures and processes of governance within a society. Power relations are institutionalized, and internalized by both women and men and power inequalities come to be accepted as ‘normal’. The debate about climate change is mainly about the science and the solutions to the impacts of climate change are also mainly dominated by scientific and technological approaches. This excludes gendered knowledge from the policy debate and policy making which in turn limits the range of possible solutions to climate change and making them socially just and inclusive.

As the World Bank highlights, a better understanding of the relationship between gender roles and natural resource management is “helpful in designing effective policies and programs for environmental sustainability” [41, p. 20]. Climate change is the most pressing environmental sustainability issue faced by humanity. A gender-neutral policy approach to climate change that does not account for gender is thus flawed from the outset to achieve sustainability and can undermine efforts for gender equality. The different positions and environmental knowledge of men and women need to inform the development and implementation of environmental or climate change policies. This leads us to the next section on climate change policies in Australia.

#### IV. CLIMATE CHANGE POLICIES IN AUSTRALIA

Strategies to reduce the vulnerabilities and risks associated with climate change are usually categorised in form of adaptation and mitigation strategies. Adaptation refers to changes in “processes or structures to moderate or offset potential dangers or to take advantage of opportunities associated with changes in climate” [25, p. 8]. Mitigation is about addressing the causes of greenhouse warming which leads to climate change by preventing or limiting the emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons. Accordingly, the Australian Government has adopted a 3 pillar approach to climate change which includes (i) contributing to a global response; (ii) reducing Australia’s own emissions, and (iii) adapting to the unavoidable consequences of climate change, and has invested about 1.8 billion Australian dollars to respond to the challenges of climate change.

On the international level, Australia was instrumental in securing an agreement at the December 2007 Bali negotiations on the roadmap for post-2012 (post-Kyoto) international action on climate change. At Bali the Global Gender and

Climate Alliance (GGCA) was founded by IUCN, UNDP, UNEP and the Women’s Environment Development Organization (WEDO), highlighting the increasing international attention to the link between gender and climate change. The goal of the GGCA is to ensure that climate change policies, decision-making, and global, regional and national climate change initiatives are gender responsive. Australia is a party to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and is thus required to annually report on its greenhouse gas status and climate change policy implementation. When the newly elected Rudd Government ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2007, Australia is also required to prepare an annual compliance report [See 40]. Australia will be part of the crucial international negotiations for a post-Kyoto framework at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen on 7-18 December 2009.

In regard to the second pillar of its approach, the Government of Australia [18] has outlined clear mitigation strategies:

- A commitment to reduce Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent on 2000 levels by 2050
- Implementing a comprehensive emissions trading scheme by 2010 to deliver these targets
- Setting a 20 per cent target for renewable energy by 2020 to dramatically expand the use of renewable energy
- Investing in research and development on low emissions technologies

In regard to the third pillar – adaptation to climate change – the Australian Government has committed funding of up to \$126 million over five years for climate change adaptation, and there are various initiatives about climate change. In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Climate Change Adaptation Framework as the basis for government action on adaptation over the next five to seven years. The key focus of the Framework is “to support decision-makers understand and incorporate climate change into policy and operational decisions at all scales and across all vulnerable sectors” [17, p. 3]. As part of this, the Australian Government established the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility in 2008 to generate the information for effective adaptation policies. Griffith University in Queensland hosts this Research Facility and leads the research in partnerships with other universities. There are various research networks on different themes, such as water resources and freshwater biodiversity (Griffith University), health (Australian National University), settlements and infrastructure (University of New South Wales), and social, economic and institutional dimensions (University of Melbourne).

Another aspect of the National Climate Change Adaptation Framework is the National Climate Change Adaptation Programme, a \$14.2 million programme which has as its main objectives to advise the Government on policy issues related

to climate change impacts and adaptation, capacity building for effective adaptation policies, and integration of climate change considerations into key policies and programmes, such as risk and disaster management.

The following section investigates how gender mainstreaming fits into these various objectives in Australia's climate change policies. The major question guiding the analysis is whether gender dimensions and gender equality are part of Australia's climate change policies.

#### V. GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND CLIMATE CHANGE POLICIES IN AUSTRALIA

Australia usually ranks in UNDP Human Development Reports amongst the top ten countries in the world on gender related development index and on gender empowerment measure. Despite this and the progress on gender equality in Australia over the last 40 years, it is still the case that "gender inequalities are a daily experience for men and women" [20, p. 3]. There exists a gender gap with women being disadvantaged in regard to financial remuneration in the workforce, the level of their superannuation, their political representation and lack of women in high level decision-making positions in government and the private sector. Women are also major victims of gender-related violence [20; see also 19].

Australia is internationally committed to the pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment. It is signatory to the Beijing *Platform for Action* for women's empowerment and gender equality which came out of the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, and the 2000 Millennium Development Goals. The Australian Government has reported to the United Nations Environment Programme that "gender analysis and mainstreaming are embedded within its government policies, all departments are encouraged to ensure that gender issues are considered throughout the policy process" [38, p.11]. A similar claim was made at the Asia-Pacific Cooperation meeting in a special session on women in 2002 [14]. However, these claims cannot be substantiated. There is much rhetoric about the extent of gender mainstreaming in government policies but this does not reflect reality. As Barnett Donaghy [7] has shown, the international commitments to implement gender mainstreaming strategies into its policies, projects and programs have been unfulfilled under the Howard Government (1996-2007). The Howard administration lacked the political will to make gender mainstreaming a priority as there was no capacity building for gender mainstreaming, gender training in government departments or collection of gender disaggregated data for policy decisions [7]). Alston [4, p. 143] also demonstrated that "there are huge gaps between rhetoric and action at national levels" in regard to gender mainstreaming in Australia. She argues that the little understanding of the concept of gender mainstreaming in government departments of agriculture even resulted in disadvantages for rural women. A change in departmental cultures and introduction of gender mainstreaming accountability measures at national and

international levels are required, according to Alston [4], to achieve gender equality.

As advised in email communication with the Office for Women, the incumbent Rudd administration is currently formalising national policies on gender mainstreaming and gender equality. It is surprising, considering Australia's international commitments to gender mainstreaming and gender equality that no such policies were developed before. This only supports the argument made by Barnett Donaghy [7] that gender mainstreaming in the last ten years was a "big fat lie". The effort about gender mainstream on the national level is in contrast to the strong emphasis and push by the Australian government's aid policies to include gender mainstreaming and equality in international development [16].

Because of the lack of a formal national gender mainstreaming policy, there is no clear guide on how to integrate gender dimensions and gender equality into climate change policies. The analysis of climate change policies showed that gender issues and gender equality do not feature in national environmental governance on climate change. The National Climate Change Adaptation Program [17] does not mention gender or the different implications of climate change for men and women. This is the same with all the other reports which are crucial documents for the formulation of climate change policies, such as the Garnaut Report [13] and the reports by Allen Consulting Group [2]-[3]. The Government's report [15] on the risks and vulnerabilities of climate change and how to achieve an efficient adaptation response in Australia does not discuss gender issues and gender equality. It states that the report highlights "the possible priorities for the National Climate Change Adaptation Programme and key issues for further consideration by government" [15, p. 25] but gender dimensions are not included although it should be a clear priority as the literature on the link between gender and climate change highlights. The general neglect of gender can also be seen in that the website of the Department of Climate Change, which is in charge with the national approach to adapt and mitigate to climate change, does not mention gender as an important issue at all. Even the recently established National Adaptation Research Facility has no specific brief or project on gender in climate change adaptation and mitigation in Australia. The lack of incorporating gender into the thinking and practice of climate change strategies is not only confined to the Government of Australia. A recent report by the Australian Climate Group, an alliance of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations, also does not mention gender issues and gender equality [6]. As another example, the Climate Change Institute, a non-partisan, independent research organisation, does not focus on gender in any of its reports and approaches about policy and research.

There are various mechanisms which could remedy this general neglect of gender mainstreaming and gender equality in the Government's approach to climate change. Sloane [31] suggests establishing a high-level Gender Equality Unit within the Prime Minister and Cabinet to provide policy leadership and a whole government perspective on that issue and to

broaden the gender agenda in policy making. Another important avenue is 'gender budgeting', to integrate gender in the mainstream budget framework, in order to analyse the impact of national budgets on gender fairness [31]. The use of gender analysis, mentioned earlier in this paper, and gender equality indicators at all levels of policy making and the collection of gender-disaggregated data are also critical for more effective and equitable adaptation and mitigation policies in regard to climate change [9], [11], [26]. It is important to keep in mind that "mainstreaming gender does not replace the need for targeted, women-focused policies and programs" as the overall goal is gender equality and women's empowerment [31, p. 9].

## VI. CONCLUSION

There is international consensus, as expressed in the Millennium Development Goal Nr. 3, that gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial for achieving ecological sustainability and sustainable development. Gender equality is thus decisive in the context of adapting to the potential impacts of climate change and to finding workable and equitable solutions. Gender needs to become an analytical tool for designing climate change adaptation and mitigation policies in Australia and elsewhere in the world. Gender sensitivity at all levels of decision-making is essential for effective and equitable mitigation and adaptation responses to climate change. This requires the incorporation of both men and women into the decision-making and power structures and processes on climate change policies, but with a focus on increased participation of women in decision-making on climate change. It also requires that gender analysis and gender mainstreaming become common practice in policy-making.

This paper has argued that gender issues and gender equality do not play a major role in Australia for shaping the policies to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to mitigate Australia's contributions to greenhouse warming. There is a general neglect of gender mainstreaming in Australia's climate change policies. Thus there is an urgent need to incorporate gender equality and gender issues into Australia's climate change strategies. This is the critical period to do so as Australia has just embarked on research for developing effective climate change adaptation and mitigation policies. There is currently a vast gap in knowledge about the link between gender and climate change in Australia. The gender specific vulnerabilities of men and women and their different roles and responsibilities in causing climate change, and being part of adaptation and mitigation strategies, are under-researched. The critical role of gendered knowledge in adaptation and mitigation policies is another area which requires more research. The urgency and importance of such research and the need for gender mainstreaming in Australia's climate change policies cannot be overstated. The lack of gender dimensions and gender mainstreaming and analysis in Australia's climate change policies diminishes the chances to

achieve effective and socially just solutions to climate change. This would threaten the progress made in regard to gender equality in the last 40 years in Australia and that in turn undermines sustainable human and social development in Australia in the face of climate change.

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#### Relevant Websites:

Climate Institute, Australia: <http://www.climateinstitute.org.au>  
Gender and Climate Change Network: <http://www.gendercc.net>  
Government of Australia, Department of Climate Change:  
<http://www.climatechange.gov.au>  
Government of Australia, Office for Women: <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au>  
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: <http://unfccc.int>