

Gender-Focused Public Policies for Adaption to Climate Change in Mexico

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Climate change (CC) is currently one of the main challenges at a global and local level because of the negative impacts on our health, social wellbeing, and food and economic security. Although CC is a global phenomenon, the degree of its impact is different for each person and proportional to their individual level of vulnerability. For this reason, it is easy to understand why women and girls, especially those living in rural areas, are widely understood by international organizations, the Mexican government, and others to be among the most vulnerable groups to CC. This has led to public policies and international agreements focusing on gender and aiming to reduce the gap in women's vulnerability to climate change. The implementation of public policies with a gender focus requires developing tools based on the recognition that men and women have different needs and opportunities due to biological factors and social structures.¹ There are good reasons for considering a gender-focused perspective in legislative proposals however it is not always feasible to evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency, and reach of those policies as is essential to their success.

Many public policies and strategies for confronting CC focus on repairing damage caused by natural disasters. According to many scientists and government advisors, this is not the best way to address the problem because some impacts of disasters and environmental damages are irreversible. Instead, some propose the implementation of strategies for adapting to new climate conditions.²

This paper defends the need to implement CC adaptation strategies with the active participation of women. Such strategies make possible changes in existing social structures to better promote equality between men and women and overcome limits to women's capacity to prepare, resist, and recover from natural disasters. Different studies indicate that women are an essential part of achieving a sustainable future, and it is necessary to implement gender focused public policies. Mexico has already implemented such policies however, as we will be discussed below, what these policies

propose does not always align with their implementation. To move from abstract ideas toward implementation of effective CC public policies, these must be contextualized and address the reality of the communities and challenges posed to them by CC.

Climate Change and Women

The rise in global temperatures associated with climate change has generated hurricanes, fires, intense rains, and prolonged droughts, resulting in loss of lives, crops, housing, and employment. This in turn has caused, or intensified, food insecurity, social tensions, and climate migration, among other consequences.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has identified 6 main impacts of CC and associated risks involving agriculture, water, biodiversity and forests, health, tourism, and poverty.³ Women and girls have high vulnerability due to existing gender structures which promote dynamics of inequality between men and women. These include reduced access to land and property, inequality in employment and wages, reduced educational opportunities, gender-based violence, and lack of power and representation.⁴ These and other factors hinder women's ability to manage resources and participate in decision-making thus limiting their ability to prepare for, resist, and recover from natural disasters.

Let's look at some evidence. A study by UN-Habitat analyses the consequences of natural disasters in 141 countries and shows that women and girls are 14 times more likely to die in a climate disaster than men.⁵ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) mentions that in Uganda cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse against women have increased after long periods of drought.⁶ In these contexts, it has also been seen that farmers and landowners offer women food or rent in exchange for sex.⁷ In Pakistan, rates of violence against women increased during the floods recorded in the summer of 2022.⁸ In 2022, in Asia and the Pa-

cific, there was an increase in the number of cases of sexual trafficking and intimate partner violence after cyclones and typhoons affected that region.⁹ Finally, it should be noted that 80% of displaced people worldwide, including climate migrants, are women.¹⁰

In Mexico, the story is not so different. In 2012 in the state of Tabasco, showed that after a natural disaster the number of deaths and illnesses in pregnant women and those undergoing an abortion increased due to being cared for in unsanitary conditions. An increase was observed in the number of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence.¹¹ Due to its location, the state of Tabasco is considered one of the most vulnerable states to CC, with the community of El Bosque being the first community of climate displaced people in the country. After the eviction of this community, it was seen that women's increased vulnerability originated from gender structures where women are caregivers for children, the elderly, and the sick which requires them to dedicate time each day to these activities while seeking new sources of income for household expenses which increased after displacement.¹² Tabasco is not the only Mexican state in which women's vulnerability increased after a natural disaster. In Acapulco, Guerrero, a 48% increase in cases of gender violence was reported after Hurricane Otis in 2023.¹³

This unequal vulnerability between men and women raises questions about the responsibility of the State to provide the necessary conditions for the strengthening of social justice and gender equity. What measures should be implemented to promote equality, development, and protection of women in the face of CC? We believe that the answer to this question is related to the design and implementation of gender-focused public policies.

Responsibility of the Government to Reduce Women's Vulnerability to CC

According to the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, article 1 of chapter 1, it is established that "All authorities, within the scope of their powers, have the obligation to promote, respect, protect and guarantee human rights in accordance with the principles of universality, interdependence, indivisibility and progressiveness."¹⁴ Therefore, when considering the unequal vulnerability of women to CC, the Government would be required to implement public policies that deal with the causes that may directly or indirectly promote discrimination, injustice, and inequality of opportunities, or other forms of vulnerability of women's human rights.

These obligations of the Government can also be considered as an ethical obligation. From a perspective of justice, equity is fundamental for building a just society and guarantees human rights. This justifies the call to establish public policies that seek to eradicate the structural inequities that historically affect women, and thus fosters the necessary

conditions for real equality of opportunity, and a dignified life for all. From a utilitarian ethical perspective, which seeks to maximize well-being for the greatest number of people, an advantage of public policies focusing on reducing women's vulnerability to climate change is that they can have an impact not only on women, but on collective well-being by reducing the suffering generated by discrimination, political, social, and economic inequality. From a perspective of ethics of care, which establishes the importance of caring for all members of society with an emphasis on those who have been marginalized, it is justified to make women a primary target of such policy and to expect the Government to contribute to ensuring a safe and equitable environment that allows the development and protection of human rights of its most vulnerable citizens. The development of public policies that reduce women's vulnerability to CC in Mexico is thus a constitutional and ethical duty.

Gender-based Public Policies in Mexico

In the case of Mexico, the differential vulnerability of women to CC has been recognized through documents published in the Official Journal of the Federation, and on the pages of various government agencies. This has motivated the creation of gender-focused public policies.

The term "gender" refers to the social and cultural constructs that determine the roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and women. Unlike sex, which is biological, gender is a social category that can vary and transform over time, and in different cultural contexts.¹⁵ A "gender-focused" perspective is defined as the recognition of the difference in the needs, opportunities, and growth possibilities of vulnerable groups including women and people from the LGBTQ+ community. Despite this broad background, the Mexican government has narrowed the focus of public policies on gender to identifying the inequities that affect women and men. In many cases, inequities reflect multiple oppressive structures that make it difficult for a population to escape a situation of vulnerability. These structures can be gender, race, disability, and socioeconomic status, among others.¹⁶ Mexico's public policies do not attempt to cover all vulnerable groups but focus on the vulnerability of women in relation to men.

Mexico's Gender-focused Climate Change Public Policies

In response to the need to strengthen public policies on mitigation and adaptation with a gender perspective, the Mexican government created the Interinstitutional Group on Gender and Climate Change (GIGCC per its acronym in Spanish), which works jointly with INMUJERES (National Institute for Women), INECC (National Institute for Ecology and Climate Change), the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and other government agencies. At the end of 2022, the Gender and Climate Change Action Plan was presented. It focuses on 3 axes: leadership of all

women; construction and consolidation of national institutional capacities; and financing and cooperation. It proposes that this program be evaluated by government entities, civil society, and international organizations on a biannual basis.¹⁷ Another program created for this purpose is the National Program for Equality between Women and Men (PROIGUALDAD) 2019-2024 to promote a culture of peace, environmental sustainability, mitigation and adaptation, and the development of research with a territorial, gender and intersectional approach to environmental degradation and CC.

The Intersectoral Commission on Climate Change (CICC), made up of 14 state secretariats, was also created to work permanently, and is responsible for guiding the main actions for mitigation and adaptation by promoting social participation in public consultations and providing follow-up to the policies, actions, and goals included in the General Law on Climate Change. Objective 1.1.9 establishes the responsibility of the Social Welfare Ministry to oversee “Generating mechanisms and methodologies to mainstream the gender approach in national and state public policy instruments on climate change, in order to assist in the fulfillment of national and international commitments in this matter.”¹⁸

One of the mechanisms created by the Social Welfare Ministry for this purpose is the Sowing Lives Program (PSV per its acronym in Spanish). It established that at least 20% of its beneficiaries must be women. This program has 4 main objectives: Achieve food security, economic well-being, strengthening of the social fabric, and the sustainability of agroforestry systems, through the creation of Farmer Learning Communities (CAC per its acronym in Spanish). CACs are collaborative groups of men and women who will be trained in how to fulfill the 4 objectives. The three types of financial support offered are \$300 US dollars monthly for the purchase of food; supplies such as seeds, machinery or services; and support in the event of natural disasters.¹⁹

Assessment of Public Policies from the Perspective of Gender

The Mexican government has established public policies (PP) aimed at reducing women’s vulnerability to CC, at least on paper. How can it move from theory to practice and implementation of these PP? How effectively and efficiently are they implemented? A search of publicly available sources sought to explore what impact these gender-focused programs have had.

One mechanism, the CICC, was established as a permanent commission but last provided a report in 2018 and a work plan in 2020.²⁰ Thus it is not possible to determine the extent to which its implementation was conducted, or to evaluate its impact.

A search of the SIS PROIGUALDAD, a system created by INMUJERES, found no updates since 2022 and the

first evaluation of the Gender and Climate Change Action Plan was due at the end of 2024. The available data shows that the percentage of women in extreme poverty rose from 7% for women and men in 2018 to 7.2% and 6.9% in 2022, respectively.²¹ (Extreme poverty is defined as a person who has three or more social deficiencies: education, health, access to social safety, quality and spaces of housing, basic housing services, and access to food).

The SIS PROIGUALDAD also shows the percentage of people benefiting from the ‘65 And Over Program’ which offers financial support to those over 64 years of age. Of those living in poverty, the percentage of women benefiting in 2018 was 67.6% compared to 55.8% of men. This rose to 78.2% and 77.1% in 2022, respectively. Among those not in poverty, the percentage change went from 44.3% of women benefited in 2018 to 77.9% in 2022 while for men the change went from 29.2% to 74% in the same period. While women benefited significantly, men benefited to a greater extent than women.²²

The National Agrarian Registry records the number of women landowners. In 2021, the percentage of women with a property title was 39.9%, and in 2024 it decreased to 36.1%. Regarding the number of women victims of violence in shelters and justice centers, in 2018 the number of abused women was 567,792, in 2022 it increased to 1,382,154, and in 2023 there were already 1,439,073 women victims of violence.²³

The CONEVAL (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, per its acronym in Spanish) reported on interviews with beneficiaries. These indicate that, due to the social and community organization in which women do the work of caring for the home and children, their participation in the CACs entails additional stress because of the additional hours needed for them to conduct tasks in the community. Additionally, while men recognized the work done by women in plots and vegetable gardens, they rejected the inclusion of women in CACs, preferring that women stay at home; and not being landowners challenges women’s participation in the PSV. Mechanisms and tools to understand and improve the positive impact made by this program are needed.²⁴

Consulting the Mexican Government Regarding Climate Policies

While writing, I made a request to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (SAGARPA), and to INMUJERES and INECC, institutions involved in the implementation of gender public policies, through INAI (National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information and Protection of Personal Data). This request sought to find out whether these institutions had studied the efficacy and effectiveness of actions implemented, whether they had identified the main challenges faced by government agencies in advancing gender equality, their compliance with national

and international regulations related to women's rights and their protection from CC, and whether strategies to benefit climate migrants had been considered.

These institutions responded that there is no evidence of efficacy or effectiveness of implementing these policies and no measures to address climate migration have been taken. The most complete response in relation to the challenges that organizations face in advancing gender equality was from INMUJERES which mentions 5 deficiencies that make clear the need to strengthen:

1. Inter-institutional work with which to combine, recognize and review the progress of public policies and promote coordinated actions;
2. Their capacities of federal and state level public officials for advancing gender equity and reducing CC vulnerabilities of women;
3. Political will at different levels of government to bring transformative change that places women at the center of developing resilience to CC and disaster risks;
4. Capacities of public officials for gender-sensitive collection and analysis of gender-based statistics involving CC; and
5. Community access to gender and CC experts who contribute to community-level proposals for the reducing greenhouse gases and including the circumstances of women farmers, foresters, recyclers, and women in transport and energy. It is not enough that gender and cc policies be established. Greater awareness among public officials and the population about need to reduce the historical vulnerability of women is needed.

Public Adaptation Policies

When discussing the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations, and the establishment of PPs that seek their protection, in the absence of government data about policy implementation and effectiveness, one must consider the irreversible environmental damage of CC that the damage can no longer be prevented. Hence it is essential to implement adaptive measures to limit the harm and injustice of the unequal vulnerabilities between women and men and the multifactorial contributors to the problem. ECLAC also highlights this and there are success stories of adaptation in the agricultural sector.²⁵

ASAC (Climate-Smart Agriculture per its acronym in Spanish) aims to reduce the vulnerability of territories and inhabitants to climate variability and build more resilient populations. It focuses on sustainably increasing agricultural productivity and income, Increasing adaptive capacity and promoting agricultural resilience, and reducing or eliminating greenhouse gases from agricultural systems.²⁶

Sánchez Hernández and Travieso Bello show the application of ASAC initiatives with two groups of coffee pro-

ducers in Veracruz, Mexico. Independent of government agencies and institutions, they worked with producers to use physical measures (cultivation of varieties resistant to pests and diseases, modifying the agricultural calendar, etc.) and social measures (diversifying income sources and community organization) to reduce future vulnerability.²⁷

ASAC initiatives led to an increase in women's economic and productive participation in ways that allowed some to have additional income. They encouraged female leadership, through training workshops and active participation in projects. This created a support network through which women share their knowledge and better face challenges while contributing significantly to food security and family sustainability. Together, these changes have improved the quality of life and development prospects of women by giving them visibility and opportunities within the coffee sector and CC adaptation.

ASAC is scaling up these efforts as noted in its "Evaluation of the Climate-Smart Agriculture Strategy (EASAC) which assesses progress in Central America, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic and Belize. This assessment shows progress at the system level and include Climate-Smart Territory (TeSAC) in Olopa, Guatemala which facilitates access to climate and environmental financing in these countries, and the Regional Resilience Building Initiative which uses synergies between mitigation and adaptation involved in Central American agriculture, forestry, and other land use.

The ASAC report addresses the implementation of adaptive measures, government interest in implementation, and development models that have yielded positive results such Costa Rica's Forestry Law, and Payments for Environmental Services (PSA). Lack of coordination by the different organizations involved in the implementation of these programs, and lack of resources allocated to them, are ongoing challenges. There is still much work to be done because some of the programs have not had the expected impact for reasons including the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸

ASAC also discusses the adoption of its recommendations by women and men in a Honduran and Guatemalan community. The measures taken increased women's personal income and access to financial services, thereby strengthening the resilience of agricultural territories as well as the livelihoods of rural communities in the face of CC. It also highlights the need for communication strategies so that the population can understand and participate in these activities. It notes that those who implemented these programs did not understand CC or its impact and implications and instead did so in response to their current circumstances. Additionally, the measures taken had no support from any public program but reflected the collective work of the community.²⁹

Clearly, public policies can reduce structural and social inequalities that exacerbate gender differences in vulnerabil-

ity to CC and can help build resilience. These are important and should empower all members of society to adapt, and perhaps prosper, in the face of CC.

Conclusions

Although there is recognition by the Mexican government of the unequal vulnerability between men and women to CC, and of the imminent need to establish PPs that reduce this gap, there is no clear evidence showing that social programs, or modifications to Mexican laws, are doing so. Public organizations such as INMUJERES attribute this to a lack of conviction about the importance of implementing these programs effectively and a perception that these are a mere formality to fulfill. It may be necessary to establish new social and cultural dynamics that allow the emergence of a more just society for men and women.

Gender oriented adaptation measures may help provide more sustainable access to natural resources by improving agricultural practices, water security, and energy resilience, while mitigating CC. PP offering adaptation may also be designed to minimize gender gaps through training in climate-smart agriculture or green entrepreneurship for both women and men, offering equal access to resources, training, and technologies, empowering women in their communities, and promoting the participation of women in decision-making on resource management and risk reduction. Women have specific roles in their communities and can provide local knowledge that contributes to more inclusive and effective adaptation.

Adaptation policies that prioritize equitable access to resources and provide relief in the event of natural disasters would help to ensure that women and men receive fair and sufficient support. This helps reduce the gender gap and allows both genders to have an equal chance of rebuilding their lives following climate disasters and other impacts. Adaptation policies can thus reduce structural and social inequalities that exacerbate gender-based vulnerability to CC. When designed with a gender lens, PPs can help build resilience and empower all members of society to adapt to CC.

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