Climate Change & Women’s Health

Climate Change is an immense issue which leaves neither humans nor habitats unaffected by its breadth. That said, it will affect vulnerable groups disproportionately. The New York Times article “Study Warns of Cascading Health Risks from the Changing Climate” pays attention to vulnerable populations, like the elderly and those who work in labor industries exposed to the heat. But where is there discussion of women’s reproductive health?

Women’s empowerment and family planning have been gaining momentum in relation to climate change as viable preventative measures for some time now. In regions with high rates of population growth, women tend to get married at an early age and have many children, despite wanting fewer children and more space between births. Since family planning and education of girls tends to delay the age of marriage and space births more effectively, overpopulation in high-risk regions can be curbed. As a result, the immense carbon footprint of population growth on our warming climate can be controlled (Sorensen, Murray, Lemery, & Balbus, 2018). It is crucial for these educational and reproductive health interventions to not fall to the wayside in further discussions on climate change and health. Not only will rising temperatures and extreme weather have negative immediate impacts on maternal health (Kuehn & McCormick, 2017), but they will also have a number of cascade effects which decrease access to family planning and education, thus threatening women’s reproductive health.

For example, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are particularly vulnerable to climate change; islands like Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Maldives are estimated to be unlivable by the mid-21st century primarily due to sea-level rise (Kelman, 2015). Typically, citizens prefer to adapt than to migrate. However, the vulnerability of these islands to sea level rise is compounded by the fact that they also have high population density and high total fertility rates. As rising seas shrink the size of the island while their populations rapidly increase, they are forced to consider migration in their national policies. What the NYT article misses and the research points out, in addition, is that women are disproportionately affected. Their life expectancy decreases at a higher rate than men in the wake of natural disasters (Neumayer & Plümper, 2007), and with island migrations, women’s reproductive health is expected to suffer with decreased access to the family planning resources they need. Thus, unmet need will increase as a result of climate conditions we have yet to encounter before (Adanu & Johnson, 2009).

Islands like these which are already facing the unfavorable conditions of a poverty trap, or an almost inescapable degree of poverty, face further challenges as they disproportionately shoulder the burden of climate change. According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) on the gendered implications of climate change, “there is a strong need to incorporate this information into adaptation and migration planning in Pacific island countries”(Campbell & Warrick, n.d.). With such a challenging problem ahead, it is crucial that articles like the one posted in the New York Times not leave out the discussion of women’s health. Not only will women be at higher risk of adverse health impacts of climate change, but policy recommendations suggest that the empowerment of women will help to prevent the negative health impacts of climate change (Sorensen et al., 2018). A gendered perspective should be integrated not only out of respect for the women of this world, but also for
the sake of mitigating the catastrophic effects of climate change on human and environmental health.

References


