

PRESS RELEASE*For Immediate Release***EIAS Briefing Seminar
“WOMEN AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA”***At EIAS Brussels**23 January 2012***Organised by the European Institute for Asian Studies,
in cooperation with the Women’s Economic and Social Think Tank (WESTT)**

The EIAS Briefing Seminar on “*Women and Climate Change in South Asia*” was held on Monday 23 January 2012 at the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels. Chaired by Ms. Madi Sharma, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and Co-Founder of the Women’s Economic and Social Think Tank (WESTT), the meeting offered the floor to H.E. Mr. Ali Hussain Didi, Ambassador of the Maldives to Belgium and the Mission to the European Union; and to Mr. Kazi Ehsanul Haque, First Secretary of the Embassy of Bangladesh to Belgium, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the European Union.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the implications of climate change for women in South Asia, especially in view of their status in society, which very often limits their access to adequate resources, health services, medicines and prevention information, thereby making them the most vulnerable towards the effects of Climate Change.

Women and Climate Change in South Asia

South Asia is one of the regions in the world most prone to disasters and the effects of Climate Change. Cyclones, typhoons, earthquakes, droughts and floods are becoming more and more frequent and intense, affecting important economic sectors such as farming, agriculture, transportation and infrastructure building. Natural disasters hit the population hard in the past years, causing casualties and losses of life, among which the majority were women. The reasons for this are manifold, as women often lack rights and have limited access to resources. They form the majority of the world’s small scale farmers and need to work hard in case of bad climate conditions. When illness and disease arise, women are often the primary victims, while they are also the most affected by violence of armed conflicts, increasingly provoked the scarcity of natural resources caused by global warming. Women need to be empowered to minimize the effects of climate change considerably. Women are the most capable of encouraging change, along with providing support to the adaptation of their communities to the effects of Climate Change and Global Warming. Policymakers should be encouraged to find effective solutions to these problems and to engage national governments, the European Union and the international community to engage women in the process, while effectively empowering them as important actors in society. Yet, reality shows that much remains to be done. Women are still

discriminated against and as the Climate Panel Fund of 2011 highlighted, out of the 100 billion dollars available for Climate Change and disaster relief, less than 10% of funding is attributed to projects concerning women.

Bangladesh is broadly recognized to be particularly vulnerable and to suffer the most severe impacts from climate change threats. Located in the Bay of Bengal in the low-lying delta of the Ganges, Bangladesh is very sensitive to sea level rise and is often affected by floods and inundations. It is also affected by droughts, while the impact of natural disasters threaten its national economy, which is strongly dependent on agriculture, fishery and water-related sectors. In this context, social problems increase while gender barriers and inequalities are amplified. Notably, the gap between men and women in coping with climate change consequences has widened significantly. The Maldives on the other hand, are also facing serious challenges due to climate change and global warming. Both in Bangladesh and the Maldives, women are confronted with limited access to resources that are essential in disaster preparedness, mitigation and rehabilitation.

Gendered divisions of labour often result in the overrepresentation of women in agricultural and informal sectors, which are the most prone to disasters. Women, in general, are responsible for reproductive tasks in households such as food provision and energy supply, as well as caretaking tasks such as childcare, sickness, care for the elderly, the home and other important assets. Women therefore face indirect problems when natural disasters strike. They are often restricted in mobility, more likely to be confined to the house with inadequate decision-making power over household matters. In addition, lower levels of education reduce the ability of women and girls to access resources and information, including early warning mechanisms, making them less able to voice their concerns. This forms an extra challenge when women want to implement innovative changes to their livelihoods. All of these aspects contribute to the limited participation of women in view of disaster relief measures and climate change prevention, and to their restricted access to information regarding potential hazards and possible resolution strategies.

Both The Maldives and Bangladesh try to provide a public response to these problems by promoting initiatives aiming at increasing women's participation in decision making processes and in public debates. The Bangladeshi government, for instance, presented the development of women rights as a primary objective to be achieved. In the Maldives, the government adopted a number of measures to encourage women to engage in small and medium size industries.

Conclusion

To conclude, the socially constructed and gender specific vulnerability of women built into everyday socio-economic patterns have led to relatively higher female disaster mortality rates compared to those of men. Women, comprising more than 50% of world population, should play more prominent roles in climate change mitigation, not only because they manage most household tasks, as well as childcare and education, but also because they are often ready to take action in mitigating climate change as a means of risk aversion. The real challenge now, is not only to empower women to make better use of their power.