

Volunteer Travel for Women in Response to the Challenge of Climate Change to Women in Rural Africa

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Abstract

Scientific data presented at conferences throughout the past several years has made it abundantly clear that climate change has progressed from being a grave concern to an urgent reality. The 5th IIPT African Conference (May 2011), provided an in-depth forum for examining the impact of the dramatic global change on the tourism industry worldwide. This paper focuses on the effects of climate change on women farmers in rural Africa, particularly in Senegal, and the specific challenges faced by these women in terms of their everyday lives, as well as their ability to participate in the societal change necessary to cope with these climatic shifts. The paper then presents one approach to coping with these problems through a program of responsible, community-based, volunteer travel for women that aims to address, on a grassroots level, some of these challenges resulting from climate change that are faced by rural women in Senegal every day of their lives.

Keywords

women, rural Africa, Senegal, climate change, volunteer travel

Introduction

The volunteer travel programs of Women Travel For Peace have evolved from Peace Through Travel for the purpose of developing volunteer travel programs for women that support and empower women's economic development in emerging societies.

Today, the Travel Division of Global Action Network of Entrepreneurial Women LLC is made up of both Women Travel For Peace and Peace Through Travel. This Travel Division is known as "Adventure Quest." The Global Action Network of Entrepreneurial Women LLC (also known as "ga'NEW") is focused on taking action to connect, support and engage entrepreneurial women worldwide, in both the industrialized and the developing worlds, for the evolution and empowerment of all women.

Our travel programs bring western women to African villages to work side-by-side with rural women to strengthen their economic standing. Village women determine the community program that will best advance their education and economic development and lead them to greater economic stability and self-sufficiency. Women Travel For Peace also known as Adventure Quest Women, works to make this happen. The result of our travel programs is one concrete step forward toward greater empowerment for the local women, as well as empowerment for the western women, though of a different nature.

In our travel work in rural Senegal, we have found that the project choices made by local women inevitably are those most immediately needed and which also, perhaps not surprisingly, relate to the demands of changing climate conditions and the social repercussions of these transitions with which they must cope on a daily basis.

With each passing day, the challenge of climate change becomes a greater concern on our planet. Yet we must bear in mind that while climate change is a risk to our entire planet (1), those countries without the economic, governmental, and municipal infrastructure to cope with sudden and dramatic changes caused by climate shifts, are more vulnerable to devastating impact. We have all witnessed the severity of these problems during the aftermath of hurricanes in Haiti 2010 and the catastrophic tsunami in Asia in 2004 (2).

Tourism, being the largest service industry in the world, with international tourism having reached US\$ 919 billion worldwide (3), has not only the possibility, but also the responsibility to contribute to the amelioration and, as much as possible, the solution to these serious threats.

Given the vast expanse of the industry's reach, tourism is positioned to contribute constructively to these solutions in various ways, as has been discussed during the recent 5th IIPT African Conference in Zambia. This paper will focus on one approach to tourism that addresses several issues at once, climate change being one of them.

Coping with Climate Change Requires Participation of All Members of Society

First, let us consider the impact of climate change and the need for all segments of society to participate in successfully coping with changing conditions. As has been discussed in previous global conferences, including the recent UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun, adaptation to climate change requires the full participation of all members of society. (4)

“The official Report of the Conference of the Parties on its sixteenth session, held in Cancun from 29 November to 10 December 2010, Part Two” outlines the decisions adopted by the Conference of the Parties.

“Recognizes the need to engage a broad range of stakeholders at the global, regional, national and local levels, be they government, including sub-national and local government, private business or civil society, including youth and persons with disability, and that gender equality and the effective participation of

women and indigenous peoples are important for effective action on all aspects of climate change; (5) ...Affirm[s] that responses to climate change should be coordinated with social and economic development in an integrated manner, with a view to avoiding adverse impacts on the latter, taking fully into account the legitimate priority needs of developing country parties for the achievement of sustained economic growth and the eradication of poverty, and the consequences for vulnerable groups, in particular women and children.” (6)

Impact of Climate Change on Agricultural Production and Rural Women in Africa

It is not surprising that shifts in climate systems can be expected to impact agricultural procedures and production. According to Gerdien Meijerink and Pim Roza, authors of “The Role Of Agriculture In Economic Development,” a paper published in 2007 as Markets, Chains and Sustainable Development Strategy and Policy Paper No. 4 (7):

“It is especially the people who live in ecologically and economically marginal and poor areas who suffer most by a decreasing availability of natural resources, as their livelihoods directly depend on them. Climate change, characterized by more extreme and unpredictable weather, such as prolonged droughts affects these people disproportional[ly].” (8) The fact is that women are the main agricultural producers on the African continent.

Journalist Christopher Connell states in his article on “African Women Farmers, An Untapped Goldmine,” appearing in Afrik-News.com, October 2010:

“In Africa, women grow most of the crops and perform most of the farm labor, as they do in much of the developing world, proving that the hand that rocks the cradle also tills the field.”

It is hard work, and they do it with distinct disadvantages, because, as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton noted in a recent speech, women farmers “are very often denied access to the best seeds and fertilizer and other assets’ that would yield bigger crops.”

David Kauck of the International Center for Research on Women and a senior gender and agriculture specialist states:

“Women often farm with rudimentary tools and without the advice of government extension agents, who can show farmers how to get more from the land. Often the family farm is not in the woman’s name, so she cannot mortgage the land or get crop insurance. And often they don’t control the sale of their produce. They don’t see what it sells for. They don’t capture the gains of their labor.”

With eradication of extreme hunger and poverty topmost on the list of the Millennium Development Goals, the United States, the UN World Food Program (WFP), major foundations and development agencies all have made securing equitable help for women farmers a cornerstone of their anti-hunger strategies. It is embedded in Feed the Future,

the Obama administration's \$3.5 billion effort to help poor countries provide enough food for their populations, principally by investing in agricultural development.

"Women farmers are the untapped solution to this problem," said William Garvelink, a senior official at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) who helps coordinate Feed the Future. As their crops and profits grow, women are "far more likely to spend those gains improving their family's access to health, education and nutrition," said Garvelink, the former U.S. ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (9)

The realities and statistics of rural African farming women as outlined by Kasham Shawanma Keltuma, CEO of Mother Nation Initiative, support these statements:

"In most African countries, rural women are the food farmers, and carry the burden of life. Africa's 100 million rural women grow almost 80% of Africa's food, including food for subsistence and food for markets. This amounts to food production of 3 metric tons each year per woman. Rural women do almost 80% of the work to provide the proper transport and storage of Africa's food. They do almost 90% of the work to process Africa's food, including the tasks such as threshing, drying, winnowing, peeling, grating, sieving and pounding. They also do almost 60% of the work related to marketing Africa's food." (10)

Table 1. A summary of the role of women in agriculture in some African countries. (11)

Benin: 70% of the female population lives in rural areas, where they carry out 60% to 80% of the agricultural work and furnish up to 44% of the work necessary for household subsistence.

Burkina Faso: Women constitute 48% of the laborers in the agricultural sector.

Congo: Women account for 73% of those economically active in agriculture and produce more than 80% of the food crops.

Mauritania: Despite data gaps, it is estimated that women cover 45% of the needs in rural areas (further details not specified).

Morocco: Approximately 57% of the female population participates in agricultural activities, with greater involvement in animal (68%) as opposed to vegetable production (46%). Studies have indicated that the proportion of agricultural work carried out by men, women and children is 42%, 45% and 14% respectively.

Namibia: Data from the 1991 census reveals that women account for 59% of those engaged in skilled and subsistence agriculture work, and that women continue to shoulder the primary responsibility for food production and preparation.

Sudan: In the traditional sector, women constitute 80% of the farmers. Women farmers represent approximately 49% of the farmers in the irrigated sector and 57% in the traditional sector; women produce 30% of the food in the country.

Tanzania: 98% of the rural women defined as economically active are engaged in agriculture and produce a substantial share of the food crops for both household consumption and for export.

Zimbabwe: Women constitute 61% of the farmers in the communal areas and comprise at least 70% of the labor force in these areas.

These threats to the farmers of Africa are particularly significant to Women Travel For Peace (also known as Adventure Quest Women) as our dedication is to improving living conditions – and life – for entrepreneurial women worldwide.

Note that at the Global Action Network of Entrepreneurial Women, we interpret the term “entrepreneurial” to describe any self-generated, profit-yielding initiative. While the entrepreneurial style of women farmers in Africa may be quite different from that of the entrepreneurial women in the industrialized west, the African women are, nevertheless, earning their living through their own, independent, commercial efforts. Thus, we consider all of us to be in the same category of entrepreneurial women around the world.

Direct Effect of Climate Change on African Farming Women

Having established the fact that rural African women contribute an enormous amount to the agricultural production on the African continent, let us consider the direct effect of climate change on the productivity of these women and, therefore, the effect on their lives and economic standing and that of their families and communities.

In her article entitled “Climate Change Policy Ignores Women Farmers” appearing in IPS News.net, August 2010, writer Kristin Palitza reports that:

“The issues of climate change, poverty, environment and gender are tightly interwoven and cannot be separated,” explained WWF South Africa national climate-change policy officer Louise Naudé during the meeting. Women farmers are particularly affected by climate change, food insecurity and disaster, so we have to drive gender equality and decrease women’s vulnerability in the sector. Research has shown that women are more likely to feel the effects of climate change because they have less access to resources. Changing weather patterns increase poor women’s work burden on gathering water and firewood. Girls may be forced to forgo school in order to contribute to the increased household work. Where traditional land tenure is practiced, women may lose land normally reserved for growing crops for household consumption to give way for commercial crops. “We need people-centered solutions that are context-specific, participatory and use local knowledge,” she stressed. “Ultimately, we want to

create environmental circumstances where women are in control and don't depend on others." (12)

African Women: Poverty, Illiteracy and Social Activism

African women are deciding that enough is enough. The United Nations Department of Public Information, in an article entitled, "Women Farmers, The 'Invisible' Producers," highlights the fact that African Women are Campaigning for More Official Support:

"Women farmers in Africa may be poor and illiterate," says Ms. Celina Cossa, president of the National Farmers Union in Mozambique, "but at the same time we are the principal force in the struggle against misery, backwardness and dependency." In many countries across the continent, rural women are pressing for a higher profile, to match their preponderant role in the cultivation and processing of the continent's food. Yet despite some progress in recent years, state agricultural programs and facilities in most African countries do not yet reflect this reality, and rural women generally remain the continent's "invisible" producers. The FAO estimates that [en bloc] in sub-Saharan Africa, 31% of rural households are headed by women, mainly because of the tendency of men to migrate to cities in search of wage labor ... Despite this substantial role, observes the FAO, "women have less access to land than men; when women do own land, the land holding tends to be smaller and located in more marginal areas. Rural women also have less access than men to credit, which limits their ability to purchase seeds, fertilizers and other inputs needed to adopt new farming techniques." Only 5% of the resources provided through extension services in Africa are available to women, notes Ms. Marie Randriamamonjy, director of the FAO's Women in Development Service, "although, in some cases, particularly in food production, African women handled 80% of the work. Of total extension agents at work in Africa today, only 17% are women."

Meanwhile, rural women have been organizing themselves to a much greater extent. In most of the countries surveyed by the FAO, there has been some growth in the number of non-governmental organizations and women's associations involving or working with rural women. Sometimes these are mixed organizations, but frequently, rural women prefer to belong to groups run by women ... According to Ms. Comfort Olayiwole, principal of Nigeria's Samaru College of Agriculture, "women's groups and projects are no longer isolated ventures, easily ignored by government or community members. Women are organizing themselves into a formidable political and social movement." (13)

Adventure Quest Women: A Travel Solution to the Climate Change-Induced Hardships of Women Farmers in Africa

Clearly, the inequities that exist between the education and access to information of policy makers and that of the poor, rural women who are most directly affected by said policies are profound. While it is interesting to ponder to what degree the travel industry can affect these hierarchical discrepancies and support those most affected by climate change, the fact is that with the enormous economic clout that the world tourism industry

wields, surely our industry is capable of affecting significant progress. Intelligent leverage is always powerful.

The Travel Division of the Global Action Network of Entrepreneurial Women, known as Adventure Quest and formerly Women Travel For Peace, is dedicated to building international peace through intimate, volunteer travel programs that join together western women with rural African women through hands-on support of local women's grassroots community projects.

In concrete terms, our programs help rural African women cope with the alarming threats of climate change to their everyday lives – their incessant toil, their lack of education, their exclusion from the domestic and political systems that have the power to improve the quality of their lives and the lives of their children. The fact that our intimate, women-helping-women involvement results in mutual growth and enrichment of both groups is an additional and precious blessing.

Because our mission is to connect, support and engage entrepreneurial women worldwide for the evolution and empowerment of all women, we are committed to improving the lives of our sister entrepreneurs who face dramatically challenging conditions in their struggle to become profitable entrepreneurs. Through our travel program, we directly assist and work side-by-side with African women who are predominantly farmers, enabling them to expand their efforts through a variety of projects.

Adventure Quest Women travel programs exist to:

Support women-determined, grassroots projects that support the education and empowerment of those most vulnerable to shifts in climate change, namely the agricultural producers, i.e., women in our targeted area of participation, sub-Saharan Africa through volunteer programs that lead to concrete results;

Bridge boundaries of culture, race, religion, language and nationality through intimate, small-group, women-helping-women travel;

Provide the opportunity for the travelers involved to interact closely and consistently with the host population, experiencing the personal enrichment and joy that comes with this new cultural exposure, which for women means cooking, singing, dancing, childcare and other universally feminine activities;

Provide the host community the opportunity to interact closely with travelers who have chosen to make this community project a priority in their own lives and contribute not only their material resources, but also of themselves through physical work and their willingness to be personally involved and transformed by this experience; and

All for the purpose of creating more peaceful world through travel – one traveler at a time.

Specific Volunteer Projects of Adventure Quest Women

Our first project, the Senegal Women's Well-Building Project (14), resulted in the first-ever, durable, concrete well for a group of village women in the Casamance region of Senegal. The trip itself:

- Provided the funding – through the travel fees of individual travelers – for the well construction.
- Included the labor of the travelers themselves for the completion of construction.

Note that the recipients of our project, the village women, had been farming all their lives with the grossly inadequate and highly unhygienic and unsafe conditions of a collection of hand-dug wells. These crude wells present serious problems, as they:

- Wash away during the annual summer rains, requiring that they be re-dug every year.
- Present a serious safety hazard to children and animals, as both easily fall into the wells.
- Yield water that is shallow and of poor quality.
- Yield water inconsistently because they are shallow. During the dry season, because the wells provide no water at all, the women must walk many miles to fetch water, which, given the limits of what they can carry, is typically not enough to provide adequate irrigation for their crops, in addition to the water needed for family use.

By the end of our project, the group of 60 women farmers who were the recipients of our efforts had an enduring concrete well, 7 meters deep, that now yields water for them all year round.

This well has dramatically improved the lives of these women as it has:

- Increased their agricultural productivity.
- Enabled the women to have greatly improved access to sufficient water for both their crops and their families' personal use.
- Eliminated the need of the women to walk long distances during the dry, scorching hot months of the year to haul insufficient amounts of water from afar.
- Reduced the hours of grueling toil under an unrelenting sun, as they are able to now access a steady water supply relatively easily.
- Reduced the safety concern of finding children or animals stranded in the hand-dug wells.

In January 2012, Adventure Quest Women/Women Travel For Peace will return to Senegal to work with women of a different village to provide them with their greatest dream – a Women's Literacy Center. (15) Unfortunately, many adult women today are unable to read. In fact, according to a United Nations Children's Fund statement, it is not only mature women who are either illiterate or barely literate. "In Senegal itself, only 15% of girls are able to go to secondary school – and later in life there are only 6 literate adult women for every 10 literate men."

While literacy may not correlate directly with climate change, it is, in fact, a critical factor in coping with environmental shifts. The problems presented by climate change are profound and require the skill, resources and participation of all members of society. Furthermore, on the African continent, which is largely dependent on agriculture for

economic growth, it is imperative that the women, who contribute the vast majority of farming labor and food processing, be equipped to take their rightful place in the policy decisions that affect them and their daily lives most directly.

In January 2012, Adventure Quest Women/Travel For Peace, will enable village women of the Casamance area of southern Senegal to move their lives forward by learning to read. This reality begins with step one – providing a place for them to study. This is the mission of our next volunteer travel program.

The travelers' fees will fund the construction, and the travelers will work together with the local women, side-by-side, during the final days of construction.

Our work will conclude with a glorious celebration for which African communities are so well known – a day of music, dance, song and the shared joy of accomplishment.

An added benefit of a travel program such as ours is that the western women – rich in resources but likely limited in exposure to the catastrophic effects of global poverty and the impact of climate change on local life – experience the transformational effects of getting to know, working side-by-side with, and supporting women who are poor in economic resources but rich in spiritual and community strength.

Lasting Benefits of Volunteer Travel

Conclusions of a study prepared by Cross-Cultural Solutions in Collaboration with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis (May 2009) (16) indicates that:

“International volunteer service positively affected volunteers' cross-cultural understanding and career path, in many cases transforming their lives. The majority of volunteers also believed they made a significant contribution to the host organizations and communities, including transferring a specific skill or providing money, time or other resources. The vast majority of volunteers did not believe that their presence in the community caused problems, and nearly all believed the community desired their services.”

Intercultural Understanding

One of the most frequently reported outcomes of international volunteering is an increase in intercultural understanding and competence. Consistent with this claim, more than 95% of the alumni reported that international volunteering exposed them to communities different than the ones they grew up in, exposed them to new ideas and ways of seeing the world, increased their appreciation of other cultures, and helped them gain a better understanding of the community where they worked.” (17)

My own travelers who joined me for the Women's Well-Building Project in Senegal express similar transformation:

“This was a wonderful experience that touched and opened a deeper level of humanity within me. I felt so very connected with some of the women there and their rootedness to what I would call spirit and what really matters. We contributed to the women in terms of the well and they were so very thankful in so many ways. ... Without a doubt, I was so very touched by many of the people of Senegal that I long to go back.”

– *Patricia DiVecchio*

“I left Senegal with a new appreciation for my time, my views and my life. I discovered that in essence we are all the same, looking to help our village.”

– *Chhayal Mehta*

“In theory, the experience sounded altruistic, humanitarian, benevolent and kind. In reality, the experience gave me more than I gave and filled me with such gratitude that I never could have hoped for yet dreamed for.”

– *Maria Sanchez*

Conclusion

The travel industry, with its massive economic influence and steadily increasing potential, provides a powerful vehicle for supporting vulnerable destinations in coping with the changes of our modern world by focusing on profit in terms of the improved quality of life for all, both those in the destination and the travelers, as well. This combination of social responsibility, political and economic awareness, and sensitivity to the evolving demands of our world and our planet are more than likely to produce profitable rewards, both in human and financial terms. It is up to us, as socially responsible and politically and economically savvy travel providers to do our part to help those most economically vulnerable and also culturally rich to move forward, as we build our businesses and support our honorable industry.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Additional information at <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/urgentissues/climatechange/threats impacts/index.htm>.

(2) Additional information at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/dec2004/tsund27.shtml>.

(3) According to the forecast prepared by UNWTO at the beginning of the year, international tourist arrivals are projected to increase by some 4% to 5% in 2011. More information at <http://media.unwto.org/en/press-release/2011-05-11/international-tourism-first-results-2011-confirm-consolidation-g>.

(4) Decisions adopted by the Conference of the Parties. Retrieved from <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/cop16/eng/07a01.pdf>.

- (5) A shared vision for long-term cooperative action, Page 3.
<http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/cop16/eng/07a01.pdf>.
- (6) Additional information at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/cop16/eng/07a01.pdf>.
- (7) Additional information at http://www.boci.wur.nl/NR/rdonlyres/98CCE2E3-0FA2-4274-BCA0-20713CA1E125/62608/Fullreport4_Meijerink_Roza.pdf.
- (8) Climate change adverse effect on farming in Africa leads to its diminished economic value. Additional information at http://www.boci.wur.nl/NR/rdonlyres/98CCE2E3-0FA2-4274-BCA0-20713CA1E125/62608/Fullreport4_Meijerink_Roza.pdf.
- (9) Women often farm with rudimentary tools and without the advice of government extension agents, who can show farmers how to get more from the land. Additional information at <http://www.afrik-news.com/article18377.html>.
- (10) The Rural Woman in this Century is a sharp contrast with her urban counterpart, unlike the urban woman, the rural woman in most African communities is saddled with enormous and even hazardous responsibilities Additional information at http://www.mothernation.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=75&Itemid=78.
- (11) This estimate is considered low as the 1991 census included the subsistence-farming sector for the first time. Additional information at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/X0250E/x0250e03.htm>.
- (12) Research has shown that women are more likely to feel the effects of climate change because they have less access to resources. Retrieved from <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52593>.
- (13) According to official labor force statistics issued by the World Bank and other institutions, 42% of the economically active population involved in agriculture in Africa is female. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol11no2/women.htm>.
- (14) Watch us in action at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Pisc_R-bzs.
- (15) An unforgettable experience – Come to Senegal. <https://www.ganew-connect.com/adventurerequest-senegal-winter-2012/>.
- (16) This is an edited version of CSD Research Report 09-10 which used a cross-sectional design to sample volunteer alumni who served with two different volunteer-sending organizations: Cross-Cultural Solutions (CCS) and World Teach. This version of the report presents the findings based on the responses from CCS volunteers. Additional information at <http://Perceived Effects of International Volunteering>.

(17) These sentiments were reflected in many statements from alumni that described how the international experience exposed them to new ideas and peoples, altered their worldview, and increased their intercultural understanding. Additional information at <http://Perceived Effects of International Volunteering>.

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