



Climate Change, Women and Role of Social Protection: A Brief Discourse with Reference to India

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is anticipated to worsen gender-specific vulnerabilities and intensify the various forms of discrimination against women. It is imperative to bolster social protection initiatives so that the detrimental consequences of climate change on women is minimized. The need of the hour is proper integration of gender considerations into programme planning, execution and surveillance in order to efficiently address the needs of women in the context of climate-related risks.

I. INTRODUCTION

Climate change, a global crisis poses one of the most pressing challenges to humanity. It impacts both genders but women are particularly vulnerable to its impacts given their socio-economic status and existing social disparities. To unravel the reasons behind why women bear the disproportionate burden of climate change, the present article delves into the key factors responsible for making women more exposed to climate induced risks along with the plight of Indian women in the face of climate change and how far social protection programmes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme contribute to embrace climate resilience ramifications for the vulnerable rural communities in India.

WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA

The connection between women and local natural environment is quite intricate and profound. Women, in particular are primarily responsible for procurement of food for family, fuel for cooking purposes, collecting water for cooking as well as for drinking purposes. However, with a changing climate, pursuing these activities are becoming increasingly difficult. The problem is all the more serious in low income and developing countries where communities are hugely reliant on

agricultural activities/natural resources for their livelihood. Women in such economies have very limited access to resources and opportunities. Furthermore, limited job opportunities and challenges in career advancement put women to higher susceptibility to societal and financial hardships. Displacement and migration triggered by climate change often results in women having to put (12-14) hours of more work in carrying out their daily chores. Furthermore, women are additionally impacted by increased mortality rates and face a significant reduction in life expectancy following severe weather events (ORF 2022). Climate change exacerbates these effects on women as it disproportionately affects them due to their marginalized social status, at the same time, heightening likelihood of further widening these existing inequalities (WHO 2014).

Women in India face challenges in obtaining clean water, with limited access to reliable information on where to find safe drinking water, how dependable it is and how much water is needed for households. Rural India has seen advancements in its water infrastructure with half of the rural homes now equipped with a tap for water access. However, it is uncertain whether this has indeed improved the reliability and safety of potable water.

The effects of climate change make it harder for women to gather fuel for cooking and lighting purposes. The use of dirty fuels has a more detrimental effect on women's health than on men since women tend to spend more time indoors and are responsible for most of the household chores. Almost half of the households in the countryside in India still use firewood for cooking, being totally oblivious of its detrimental health impacts. The lack of availability of LPG gas, high cost are the reasons why women are reluctant to switch from traditional cooking fuels. Failure to solve these problems could jeopardize the success of the initiatives to provide clean cooking fuel to rural families in need. When discussing climate change



effects, it is crucial to acknowledge the considerable presence of women working in the agricultural sector. By 2030, it is possible that 17 million Indians will not have sufficient food to sustain themselves. By 2050, there could be a 16% reduction in the overall food production thereby aggravating health problems of women in India. It is crucial to observe that the majority of people employed in agriculture in India are women, making up about 62.9% of the workforce (Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Report 2023). The lack of equal land rights for women puts them at greater risk and diminishes their ability to safeguard land. Women who are landowners are more apt to have a voice in household and farming decision-making. Suggestions for addressing the issues of insufficient land and small farms include implementing alternative group farming techniques.

SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES AND ITS ROLE IN CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

Social protection initiatives fulfil a dual purpose in alleviating the repercussions of climate shocks on women. Firstly, they function as vital interventions that assist women in regaining their stance after experiencing setbacks due to climate-induced disturbances, offering indispensable support such as financial assistance, healthcare services or job retraining programmes. Secondly, these initiatives serve as protective barriers that shield women from initial adverse effects providing preventative strategies like insurance plans, cash transfers, employment-generating programs or various safety nets. Collectively, these endeavours guarantee that women receive both the necessary support for recovery and the protection against potential future losses stemming from climate shocks.

Secondly, climate change has a disproportionate impact on women exacerbated by prevailing gender inequalities. Their dependence on natural resources for survival which climate change jeopardizes renders women more vulnerable than men particularly in rural regions (Adeyeye and Fischer 2023). Nevertheless, women possess significant resource management abilities, making their involvement in adaptation strategies essential for bolstering any community resilience (Adeyeye and Fischer 2023).

The convergence of social protection, climate change and gender unveil numerous significant interactions. One approach involves weaving climate adaptation strategies into social protection initiatives to effectively tackle climate-

related risks. Another aspect lies in the climate adaptation strategies that recognize gender-specific vulnerabilities while leveraging women's expertise and skills to enhance effectiveness (Dasgupta 2024). Furthermore, the interaction is manifested in providing women with access to climate-resilient resources and technologies (Adeyeye and Fischer 2023). The underlying principle of this connection is that the integration of social protection, climate and gender considerations fosters a comprehensive strategy that combats poverty, gender inequality and climate vulnerability, paving the way for sustainable development (Adeyeye and Fischer 2023); (Pereznieto and Holmes 2023). Social protection initiatives also tackle wider issues such as health, gender-based violence and education which foster women's empowerment and resilience against climate change. Education significantly enhances women's agency and resilience equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions and access resources.

MGNREGS IN PROTECTING THE SOCIALLY MARGINALIZED AGAINST A CHANGING CLIMATE

Climate-related disasters, fluctuating weather conditions and shifts in precipitation have significantly disrupted the means of subsistence for rural communities that heavily rely on agriculture. As a result, men often leave their homes to find alternative employment opportunities outside farming, while women are left to bear the negative impacts of these severe climate events. This can be seen through their decreased access to food, increased financial burdens and involvement in lower-paying jobs. It is believed that social programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) can be beneficial in assisting rural communities and economies to adjust to the impacts of climate change. This is achieved by incorporating measures for managing climate risks into its provisions which tend to attract a significant number of women. In order to support this scheme, it would be ideal for the government to increase its budget allocations - particularly considering that approximately 60% of the budget designated for MGNREGA is utilized for natural resource and water management, as well as efforts towards drought-proofing and providing livelihood security for those who are impoverished or marginalized (Ministry of Rural Development 2019).

The MGNREGA encompasses several pivotal gender-sensitive provisions (UNICEF 2019):



- A one-third reservation for women at worksites
- Equal remuneration for both men and women
- Designated tasks for pregnant and lactating women
- Reservations within central and state employment guarantee councils
- The establishment of crèches and child care services at the worksite, and
- The provision of safe drinking water, rest periods, first aid and shaded areas for children.

These design elements are meticulously crafted to acknowledge the unique roles of women – not merely as employees and beneficiaries but also as caregivers. The Act aspires to meet the diverse needs of women throughout various phases of their life-cycle within the workplace – particularly by facilitating less physically demanding tasks, offering breaks and so forth during pregnancy; assigning roles such as child-care for older women and establishing crèches for children on-site. The preferential approach to securing employment in proximity to women's residences further underscores the acknowledgment of their unpaid caregiving responsibilities and addresses the gender-specific challenges related to mobility (UNICEF 2019). The design of MGNREGA does not adequately address the underlying structural constraints, such as gender norms, that limit women's voices and mobility within these communal and public arenas. Implementing measures to alleviate the restrictions on women's voices and their involvement in community-level decision-making concerning the nature and placement of projects would have been essential in acknowledging and tackling these structural barriers (UNICEF 2019). A women centric development framework must guarantee the involvement of women at all levels of governance be it national, subnational or local levels. Due to the heightened risks and responsibilities placed on women as a result of climate change, their contribution in decisions related to climate change is vital for the effectiveness of adaptation and mitigation strategies.

II. CONCLUSION

Gender equality is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development goals. To ensure sustainability, it's important to not just have conversations about our actions to combat climate change, but also identify gender specific adversities and provide assistance especially to women who are

already experiencing its perilous effects. This along with proper formulation and implementation of policies will undoubtedly enhance the position and power of women in the society. This in turn will not only help to strengthen the global fight against the climate crisis which looms large, but will also ensure greater social justice and gains all across the humanity.

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