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Doubly marginalised: Women rights in the age of climate change

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Abstract---Climate change is destroying our lives through rise in sea level, climate related deaths, malnutrition, floods, cyclone, droughts, heat waves etc. The problem further worsens when we fail to understand that though climate change affects everyone but it affects more who are at vulnerable position, especially women. They suffer greater safety and health risks because they are the last to be rescued, their sanitation is being compromised. Women also do not fully participate in climate related planning and policy due to unequal participation in decision making process. Women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change in situations of poverty and due to existing roles, responsibilities and cultural norms. This paper suggests that the women are first responders in crises, entrepreneurs of green energy and decision-makers at home, women offer valuable insights and solutions into better managing the climate and its risks. Hence, women can play a critical role in response to climate change due to their local knowledge of and leadership in sustainable resource management and/or leading sustainable practices at the household and community level.

Keywords---Climate Change, Women Rights, Women's Health, Doubly Marginalized.

Introduction

Women are often responsible for gathering and collecting food, water and fuel for cooking. Extreme weather condition like flood or drought makes these tasks more difficult for women. The case study of water wives in state of Rajasthan is an example of how role of women is defined due to climatic conditions of the region and scarcity of water. Also, the cost to battle with climate crisis like heat waves are often cannot be dealt by women who also suffer from patriarchy, lack of economic independence and poverty. Adverse pregnancy outcomes due to climate change also affects woman and the child which makes it more important to consider women rights in terms of reproductive and maternal health as women are mothers and care givers in the family. If the child suffers physically or mentally, additional duty may fall upon the women which would require women to give more energy, time and distance from career/self care.

After natural disasters, due to changing climate conditions, women are migrated and unable to return home. This even makes them more vulnerable towards sexual violence, trafficking and forced labour etc. After such calamities available jobs are construction or rebuilding which are traditionally male dominated areas. Hence, women suffer from inequality, lack of opportunity and even worse-malnutrition. The climate crisis affects their health on day to day basis.

In a small village of Maharashtra called Danganmal, drinking water comes from only two wells which are located at very far away and take hours of waiting. The village economy depends upon agriculture and it requires all the family members to work on fields. Now the question comes who will fetch the water for household when in case any other member fell sick? The answer is water wife.

Though in India polygamy is a punishable offence but in this village because families face shortage of safe drinking water men has to marry again so that women in house will remain present to work in field and fetch water. This problem is due to the climate which resulted in more than 19000 villages faces shortage of water in Maharashtra. And marrying for water has been norm here for many years which is accepted by women and other members of the society.

Women has accepted this as her faith and lives in same house. Sometime even widows or abandoned woman are happy to become water wives. These woman do not care about any rights in marriage because their only concern is to fetch water for their family members. This is the case in India where rights of women are affected due to climate change and lack of concern from the side of government. Despite having the knowledge state has done nothing to curb the increasing number of water wives by substituting it with water wives.

There are other examples when women are badly affected in health, education, excessive labour, sexual offences and migration due to climate change. UN estimates that 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries and 50-60% in parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are women. And due to climate change in times of droughts and erratic rainfall women has to work hard to secure fuel, water and food for families.

In order to manage this burden, girls are the first one to be pressurized by the family to dropout from schools. This makes them vulnerable to child marriage, early pregnancy and health issues. This vulnerability is further aggravated by poverty, lack of economic independence, discrimination, migration and often results in increase in domestic violence and sexual violence against women. This makes women doubly where she suffers poverty like men and along with this face discrimination. The irony comes when society does not give much importance to women while fighting with climate crisis. But what exactly climate crisis is which makes the woman doubly marginalized?

Climate change and its impact on women

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to other natural climate variability that has been observed over comparable time periods.”

Climate change impact us in lot of ways like changes in pattern of rainfall which may lead to droughts or even flood, natural disasters, rise in temperature, melting of glaciers which results in rising level of sea which makes low lying area not fit for habitat and further results to migration ([Sorensen et al., 2018](#)). The climate change at global level affects on economy, security and human rights. But women are disproportionately burdened due to already existing discrimination and vulnerability. Climate change is also an issue of human dignity and hence is inseparable from human rights.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provides a link which shows how harm caused by climate change makes women more vulnerable and how women's decision making process could protect the environment. It is often seen that climate change leads to migration and due to displacement women are first to experience abuse and deprivation. Hence, it is necessary to achieve gender equity in the age of climate change.

Climate change also increases gender based violence which includes domestic violence, sexual violence, child abuse and human trafficking due to migration. It also results in health issues due to unsafe living conditions and overcrowding. The increase in poverty and loss of community also causes reason for violence and since at the time of world wars it is often said that women are the first one to encounter violence. In Papua New Guinea due to unavailability of safe medical care women and infants witnessed death in child birth.

In India, 8 in 10 women from middle class and lower middle class are responsible for collecting water for daily household chores. In India 65% of workforce in agriculture includes women. The increase in temperature and burden on women to fetch water from a distance along with collecting fuel in rural remote areas causes health issues in women who are natural care giver in the family. Though women are the first to experience ill effects of climate change, women's participation and leadership from local to international level in decision making process of environment protection is declining.

A study from Uganda has revealed that men notices impact of climate change in agriculture productivity and experience financial stress due to crop failure. This increasing loss causes marital stress and women often become victim of violence. Women not only suffer economic abuse where they are not the part of decision making but, at worse, women experience domestic and sexual violence at the hand of spouse and in areas like Andhra Pradesh and North East women become victims of human Trafficking.

Often areas like G. B. Road and Kamathipura are filled with stories where women were forcefully brought in the name of job at urban areas. And women readily migrate to take up a job due to worsening economic condition of the family, mostly these families are dependent upon agriculture and face loss of livelihood due to lack of rain and debts.

The Tsunami of Thailand in 2004 witnessed more women died as compared to men since they stayed back at home to look after for children and relatives. Also they did not know how to swim and climb trees. Study shows that this often occurs due to discrimination women faces on the basis of gender roles assigned to them. Hence, it would not be wrong to say that in the age of climate change women not only are affected due to climate crisis but the already existing inequalities make them more vulnerable. Cases like 2016 hurricane in Haiti, saw increase in sex trafficking of girls due to rise in economic deprivation. Also the 2015 earthquake in Nepal resulted in increase in early child marriages of girls because the concerns of orphaned girl due to earthquake concerned the community.

Existing gender inequality is also one of the reasons which makes women doubly marginalized in the age of climate change especially in case of access to health care and health status. It is found that a woman is unable to receive medical care because in some communities she is prevented from travelling alone to clinic. In countries where women have low social, economic and political status as compared to men makes them more vulnerable because women are unable to meet financial requirement of medical care due to lack of financial independence.

In south west region of Bangladesh water logging was a concern. But women were more affected by this as compared to men because of the prescribed gender roles. Since women are the primary care givers of the family, who manage water collection, food and taking care of the family they spend more time in the premises of water logging. This is the reason why women have severed ill health issues as compare to men in coastal areas. Therefore, it can be say that Water logging has given rise to differential health effects in women and men in coastal Bangladesh (Neelormi, 2009).

Hence it can be concluded that Climate change has an impact upon women in following manner:

1. Women often experience lack of access to health services and also women constitute majority of those who primarily take care of sick and therefore more vulnerable to infectious diseases.

2. Due to scarcity of water women have to walk a long distances to fetch water, which causes health related issues also increase in work burden also implies less time for education and which results in lack of economic independence and poverty in women.
3. In some communities due to gender norms women are not taught how to swim and hence these social gendered norms influence the risk of injury and death in case of extreme weather conditions.
4. Forced migration due to natural disaster caused by climate change also causes increase of violence at household level, harassment and loss of privacy at shelters.
5. Due to migration women are often left to work in informal sector due to household expenses and this causes health issue along with risk of malnutrition due to loss of income.

Exploration of rights

Previously the discussion was only concerned to climate change and economy but with the increase in climate change the right discourse have also emerged which talks about violation of human rights due to climate change. This paper examines how climate change affects women right to health, right to equality, right to dignity and right to education.

Right to Health

There are following instances where women's right to health is been violated due to climate change in India:

1. Increased temperature leads to increased mobility, mortality and adverse reproductive outcome in women. This is due to poor access to healthcare and cooling facility, lack of awareness of women's vulnerability to heat and culturally prescribed heavy clothing garments.
2. Poor air quality from combustion of fossil fuel brings respiratory and cardiovascular diseases women. This is because India still has traditional indoor stoves for cooking and women spend more time in the home.
3. Women suffer decreased life expectancy after disasters because women have unequal access to basic social goods and it got worse due to socioeconomic status.
4. Due to change in rainfall pattern women suffer higher risk of nutrient deficiencies as compared to man because cultural practices in India priorities food provision for children and male first.
5. In remote areas of Maharashtra and Rajasthan water insecurity and water scarcity is common which led to women travelling long distance to procure water and this increases exposure to heat. This is followed because in India traditionally women have the house hold role of providing water.
6. In India women spend more time around the house performing domestic tasks, which places them in close proximity to domestic standing water and mosquito breeding sites and hence 1 out of 3 pregnant women in India suffer from malaria.

Case Study

In a small district of Maharashtra called Beed, women have no wombs. Women here are mostly indulging as cane cutters to earn their livelihood. These women are mostly migrated from Marathwada due to drought and in search of livelihood. In Beed district contractors do not hire women because they often demands off from work due to menstrual cycle or pregnancy. Therefore these women chose to voluntarily undergo hysterectomies, a surgical operation to remove the uterus. This is one of the terrifying example women's right to health and reproductive right is affecting due to climate change.

Right to equality

Rights discourse often talks about non discrimination and right to equality for women in normal circumstances whereas during climate crisis women are the one who suffered inequality the most. Women are at higher risk of poverty already and after any disaster or calamity when women are subjected to migration they are more likely to live in inadequate housing. This usually happens because women have limited control over decisions governing their lives and due to this inequality women face more problems to adapt to changes.

Also, early warning mechanisms, shelters, and relief programmes have frequently neglected the specific accessibility needs of diverse groups of women, including women with disabilities, older women and indigenous women. Due to the existing inequality and negative gender stereotype, it is failed to recognise the contribution which women is making post disaster management and climate change mitigation. Inequality can be seen when women are the first to suffer from malnutrition, loss of education, poverty and early marriage as a consequences of migration due to climate change.

Right to live free from gender-based violence against women and girls

The stereotyped role of women and their subordinate position with respect to men is often perpetuated by committing gender based violence through social, economic and political means. Situations like disaster, floods etc due to climate change provides an opportunity to increase gender based violence against women. In a time of heightened stress, lawlessness and homelessness, women face an increased threat of violence. Situations like 2016 hurricane in Haiti witness increase in women trafficking and earthquake in Nepal shows increase in child marriage due to insecurity of orphaned girls. The stress due to migration or loss of livelihood also causes a reason for domestic violence within house and this the crucial areas where international convention and state could not interfere due to culture and personal laws.

Right to education

Article 10 of Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women concerns the elimination of discrimination in education. Also education improves the position of women to mitigate climate change because prevention and mitigation of disasters and climate change require well trained women and

men. Though women and girls already faces discrimination in access of education and sadly, after any disaster or climate crisis women faces more obstacles to access education and are first to drop out from schools due to economic hardships, security concern or lack of infrastructure etc.

Right to adequate standard of living

The effects of disaster in case of lack of food, land and water are not gender neutral and affect women more because at the time of food scarcity a girl child or women are more prone to malnutrition as compared to men. Also the additional burden to collect fuel, water, and prepare food women causes hardship, stress and exposure to violence because of lack of safe and accessible drinking water and fuel.

Women in rural areas are small holders of farm land and due to existing social laws and discriminately laws women have limited access to secure land tenure. Due to climate crisis like flood when their farm lands become inferior in quality, they are forced to work as a labour without any social and financial security. This makes women more vulnerable to poverty, sexual exploitation and malnutrition etc.

Water wives in India

Denganmal village in western Maharashtra has originated the concept of water wives. It is also called Pani Bai when a man marries for fetching water from distant sources. It is a small village of 500 population. The man works in the field and woman cook, clean, feed & bathe children, run the house and also because the economy of the village is mostly agrarian, women also works in the field along with the man. But there is a massive problem exists for women because the region faces a drought like condition. Village is in remote dry hilly area which is isolated from most of the villages.

Women have to walk 12 to 14 hour just to fetch water for the family. It is difficult for woman to leave household chores and children for so long. Also, in case of sickness and pregnancy the question comes who will fetch the water. Hence, elderly of the village come to a solution called water wives. A man from the village married an abandoned woman who could not fend for herself in life and she willingly agreed to become a water wife despite his legally wedded wife live along with him. The only job of water wives is to fetch water and serve their husband.

Ground reality

Despite increase in temperature which is minimum 40 degrees, women are supposed to walk 12-14 kilometres a day and fetch water for the house. Is the marriage compensation worth for such inhuman consideration?

The age old mindset in village is women are meant to serve and it still continues despite visions of modernity. The questions comes in mind whether the government slogan of 'Sab ka Saath, San ka Vikas' failed to provide adequate opportunities for the development of women rights.

It is like women are seen as substitute of water pipes or tankers and no one is ready to initiate any development for the region. And this led to the women understanding where she has internalized the patriarchal oppression as a fate. The major concern is of gender inequality and negative stereotype women role where it is expected from women to fetch water and live in polygamy.

It is an extreme manifestation of patriarchy and coupled with poverty, the impact it has on the lives of women. Lastly, it would be wrong to say that by providing water patriarchy would disappear because economic disparity would still prevail in the community. But it is time to highlight how climate change makes women more vulnerable.

Suggestions

Efforts to combat climate change cannot be as effective as intended if half the world's population has no voice or presence in the legal frameworks guiding mitigation and adaptation processes. Hence, it is become necessary to bring women in mainstream, make sure to remove discrimination against women, provide adequate protection to women against climate crisis and increase their participation in policy making which can reduce climate crisis. Following are some suggestions:

- [1] Ensure access to better health system for women especially because of their care giving roles.
- [2] Outreach activities should also be started using education and communication strategies.
- [3] Affordable drinking water should be provided to women.
- [4] Equal participation of women should be promoted in management of natural resources at international, national and local level.
- [5] Women's right to own land should be promoted by bringing agrarian reforms in the country.
- [6] Taking into account different gender norms and roles women and men should be targeted differently in communication campaigns of health strategies.
- [7] Policy initiatives should be taken in health, education, finance and labour sectors to prevent violence against women.
- [8] Both women and men should be targeted differently in post-disaster relief, taking into account gender norms, roles and relations.
- [9] Gender perspectives should be integrate into mitigation and adaptation initiatives against climate crisis.
- [10] Women should be bring into planning, financing and implementation of climate responses including food security, agriculture, health, water and sanitation etc.
- [11] Principles of gender equality and women empowerment should be integrated while financing for climate change. Poverty reduction of women should be considered while planning.

- [12] Ensure gender sensitive approach while investing in disaster preparedness, response and recovery activities.
- [13] Integrate Environmental Conservation and Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation with Women's Health Programming.

Conclusion

It is well established from the case study and analysis of rights that women are already vulnerable due to societal norms, patriarchy, discrimination and violence but the age of climate change worsens the condition of women and the status of women is ignored. The biggest example is when whole of the population of the earth is affected due to climate change and crisis then why women has lack of participation and say in decision making process.

The participation of women in policy making to mitigate climate change is not only less but also does not realize. However, the factor those women are natural care-giver and can play a critical role in response to climate change due to their local knowledge and leadership ([Buckingham & Mason, 2017](#)). Women can be the first source to implement sustainable practices at household and community level. But yet due to inequality and patriarchal norms women are not equally represented at the political level.

If the policies are implemented without women participation it can led to ineffectiveness. Also since women are not adequately represented at political level it is difficult to have a gender sensitive approach while framing policies or programme to protect women rights. If women rights are not protected then they would not be able to participate in climate mitigation programme and activities. Hence, in order to have whole population working to protect environment it is necessary that both the gender are equally represented.

It is important to recognize the existence of barriers to women's participation and leadership and understand and assess the nature of these barriers example literacy, social norms and poverty. These barriers should be taken into considerations while designing policies for women. However these barriers could only be best understand and analyzed by a woman therefore, women participation here becomes necessary ([Dankelman, 2010](#)). Otherwise policies or programmes which are based on men experience would lack practicality and gender sensitive approach.

Lastly, it would be possible to improve the condition of women even in the age of climate change, only if we could understand the already existing barriers for women which make them doubly marginalized in the age of climate change.

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