

**International Conference on
The Eastern Himalaya: Gender, Poverty and Livelihoods**

Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research,
Jamia Millia Islamia,
(A Central University)
New Delhi - 110 025 India

Conference Concept Note

Eastern Himalaya region covers a geographical area that crosses five countries: part of Nepal, entire Bhutan, part of India's North and North East, and part of China's Yunnan province and of Sagaing Region, Chin State and Rakhine State of Myanmar. The region has diversified landscapes, a multitude of different ethnic groups, and a rich variety of animals and plant species.

The region is poor in general according to GDP and per capita income. Industrialization is underdeveloped. This not only affects economic development but also the development of infrastructure such as roads and communication facilities. Out-country labour migration to the Gulf countries and South East Asia and internal migration have intensified in the last decades. The region has higher maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate and shorter life expectancies than their counterparts outside the eastern Himalayan region. Climate-induced disasters such as droughts, floods, and landslides are frequent in this region.

In the last decade, climate change has been recognized increasingly as an important factor affecting and continuing to affect profoundly various aspects of our planet. It is affecting the availability of water resources, and biodiversity and ecosystems, hence challenging people's livelihoods, health, security, and wellbeing. Rural populations, notably the ones highly dependent on land-based resources for their livelihoods, are likely to be the most negatively affected by changes in ecosystems caused by climate change. However, the impacts on human wellbeing have not been well documented so far.

Women have always been intimately connected with natural resources due to their role and responsibility as caregivers and providers. But gender inequality in asset distribution and lack of opportunities means that they are being severely challenged in the face of climate related disasters and change. Poor women of all countries appear to be facing a double vulnerability, first, of being women and second, being poor. Women and men have differing roles, responsibilities, rights, skills, knowledge, time and resources etc and these differences manifests itself in their exposure to different risks. Gender inequality also intersects with other types of discrimination such as ethnicity, caste, class, age etc. Countries like India with their varied and differentiated social and cultural milieu throw up a complex web of challenges for women, which would require serious thought and purposeful action.

In many countries, lack of education, economic constraints and restrictive cultural norms create barriers for women to get paid employment. Their jobs are limited to subsistence agriculture and water collection which are climate sensitive sectors. Finding food, water, fuel and caring for

children and the elderly become their daily chores which ultimately leave the woman with no leisure time. Moreover her education, employment and participation in decision making processes are not given priority, thus further entrenching unequal gender relations.¹ Women face food and nutrition insecurity and scarcity of water which in turn forces them to travel long distances which in turn exposes them to sexual assault, especially in areas of conflict. The privatization of water is a human rights issue which affects women but they are not adequately consulted in the design and management of water programmes vis-à-vis men. Women are the main users of household energy and one finds that a lot of time is spent on collecting fuel for cooking. In India, women spend 2 to 7 hours a day in collecting fuel for cooking while in Sub-Saharan Africa; many women carry 20 kg of fuel wood on an average of 5km per day. This is considered quite routine for many women. It is everyday on these same roads which makes them extremely vulnerable to attacks as well as when they access open spaces to “answer nature’s call” since sanitation too is not advanced in many of these regions.²

A study conducted in Ghana had concluded that women tend to prioritize the needs of their husbands when there is water scarcity, thus rendering themselves vulnerable. Women would ensure that their husbands were provided their water needs before looking after their own requirements. In India and Africa, fetching water which accounts for 30% or more of women’s daily energy intake leaves them with no time to invest in education or other activities with greater long term benefits. Moreover, water collection and long hours of walking to the wells leave many women with exhaustion and injuries of various kinds to the vertebral column.³ With climate change and resultant desertification of many areas, women would face increasing hardships in the coming years of not only inadequate food and water but also higher threats to their life and dignity.

The World Disasters Report recognizes that women and girls are at a higher risk of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, trafficking and domestic violence in disasters. Biodiversity loss can also increase insecurity for women with the additional problem of household food hierarchies in some cultures.⁴ A study conducted across six districts in Assam on the impact of climate change on marginalized women found that firstly, excessive floods would often lead to disruption of communication which in turn would lead to the forcible disruption of education for the girls; secondly, during disasters, women faced not only food crisis but also lack of toilet facilities. They could not maintain hygiene nor maintain privacy as all men and women were huddled in the shelter. Bharati Borah, a social scientist based in the island Majuli on the Brahmaputra river in Assam, observes that limited opportunities for women as wage labourers in the rural areas was also forcing women to go to the nearby towns which in turn was making them vulnerable to the social problems.⁵

A study conducted in three villages of Eastern Bhutan found that although Buddhist traditions and values consider men and women to be equal, Eastern Bhutan has a high poverty rate with

¹ Skinner, Emmeline (2011), *Gender and Climate Change- Overview Report*, Institute of Development Studies.

² *Ibid.*

³ World Health Organization (2012) *Mainstreaming Gender in health adaptation to climate change programmes*, (User’s Guide), World Health Organization,

⁴ World Health Organization (2010), *Gender, Climate Change and Health*, World Health Organization.

⁵ Borah, Amarjyoti, Devi, Sabita and Medhi, Manisha (2012), *Impact of Climate Change on Marginalized Women- An Exploratory study across 6 districts in Assam*, Guwahati: CESPR, RGVN and INECC.

women's literacy rates being lower than men's (31% as compared to 61% in Pemagetshel and 45% as compared to 64% in Trashi Yangtse). With climate change and the reduction in harvests, other non-farm opportunities are required and it is here that the women with lower literacy rates fall behind which in turn also ends up affecting their adaptive capacity. A study in Nepal too conducted in three Village Development Committees in Bejhand district and five Village Development Committees in Terhathum district also revealed that women generally lack education and financial assets and their rates of pay are lower than those of men. Meanwhile in the North East of India, a study conducted out in five villages in Karbi Anglong in Assam and East Garo Hills in Meghalaya has pointed that (a) women travel longer distances as springs and other sources close to villages are drying up; and (b) as the productivity of agriculture declines and men go in search of wage labour opportunities, the workloads of their wives are increasing.⁶

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization has also observed that out-migration of the male population which is much more than the female population in many areas of the world puts additional pressure on the female headed households and women farmers. Women are left alone to face the natural disasters and the burden on women and girls to look after the sick in times of environmental disasters further limits their time and energy for self-development.⁷ Also moneylenders are unwilling to provide loans to the women in the villages as they cannot provide/offer any collateral. Aditi Kapoor has observed that in West Bengal (after storm AILA), many men migrated and women were forced to go to the deeper jungles to collect honey, shrimps and other non timber forest products which the men used to collect earlier. Women have complained that now in this situation, they have firstly no time to look after their vegetable gardens (which is crucial for food security) and secondly, they are at the receiving end of tiger attacks in the forests and crocodile attacks in the river.⁸

Gender inequality has resulted in unequal access and control over household and societal resources like economic resources (credit, money, micro-credit, land, health insurance and housing), political resources (positions of leadership and opportunities for negotiations), social resources (community resources, social support networks, information, education, skills), time resources (amount of hours in a day that a person can use as wanted), internal resources (which includes self-confidence and the ability to express oneself). Loss of land especially has meant loss of livelihood and has increased poverty and malnutrition. In the coming years, climate change is going to aggravate the situation and women are going to become increasingly vulnerable. Article 14 of CEDAW (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) has thus stressed on the following rights for women: equal access to land, agrarian reform and land resettlement schemes, access to credit and loans, marketing facilities along with proper technology.⁹

Women and children are 14 times more likely to die in natural disasters than men. The death rate among women aged 20-44 years was 71 per 1000 compared to only 15 per 1000 for men in the

⁶ Macchi, Mirjam, Gurung, Amanda Manandhar, Hoermann, Brigitte and Choudhury, Dhruvad (2011), *Climate Variability and Change in the Himalayas- Community perceptions and responses*, ICIMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal.

⁷ Mainstreaming Gender in health adaptation to climate change programmes (2012), *op.cit.*

⁸ Kapoor, Aditi (2011), *Engendering the Climate for Change – Policies and Practices for gender-just adaptation*, Supported by Alternative Futures, Heinrich Boll Foundation and Christian Aid.

⁹ Mainstreaming Gender in health adaptation to climate change programmes (2012), *op.cit.*

1991 cyclone in Bangladesh. This was the result of two things: firstly, the lack of information or unequal access to information for women secondly, social and cultural norms that curbed the physical mobility of women as women and girls are not taught to swim in some cultures.¹⁰ Extreme weather events and floods are causing problems in the coastal areas where again women face the brunt. For instance, in Bangladesh, water logging affects women more as many women are unable to leave for temporary shelters or get medical help because of loss of culturally appropriate clothing. Moreover, contamination of drinking water in the coastal areas has further led to pregnant women being diagnosed with pre-eclampsia, eclampsia and hypertension.¹¹

Two critical issues which are coming up with regards to women and environment is the menace of organized trafficking of women and inadequate relief and compensation. Organized trafficking of women is a serious risk associated with environmental problems. Climate related disasters often break the local security systems which are there for women, leaving them and their children separated or unaccompanied by a male family member. The traffickers take advantage of the erosion of normal social protections during disasters and trap vulnerable women. Women in the mountain systems are particularly vulnerable as they are more prone to nature and man-made related disasters (landslides and erosion are common) and the basic services such as transport, education, health care etc are not readily available.¹² Women are also denied proper relief or compensation after the disaster. Brigitte Leduc comments that economic assistance, compensation, training etc are all given through men as they are considered the heads of households. It becomes therefore very difficult for widows, single women and women headed households to access or claim compensatory benefits. This was evident in northern Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake as well as in Bangladesh after the 1991 cyclone. Allotment of land or housing was denied to women in Bangladesh as the previous ownership patterns (before the disaster) were in the name of men. Often when women resist this discrimination, they are battered by their own male family members. For example, after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, there were cases where women were beaten up by their husbands when they protested against the improper use of relief funds or selling of their jewellery by their husbands.¹³

A new study focusing on Assam has found that the number of child marriages have increased in recent years as parents of impoverished families find an early marriage an easier way to provide for a better future for their girl children. Moreover, the collapse of the tea plantations (due to unusual rain), decline in tea production and the lack of adequate jobs in this sector was also found to be responsible for girls being forced into flesh trade.¹⁴ One finds that women's vulnerability is perceived as an issue of physical weakness. However it is primarily due to lack of assets and power, which in turn leads to lack of capable resilience. They have less control of resources with greater responsibilities.

One needs to focus on deep rooted social and cultural stereotypes which are creating hindrances to the inclusion of women. Nowadays the new slogan is "climate justice" which needs to be

¹⁰ Skinner, Emmeline (2011), *op.cit.*

¹¹ Gender, Climate Change and Health, WHO (2010), *op.cit.*

¹² Nellemann, Christian, Verma, Ritu and Hislop, Lawrence (2011), *Women at the Frontline of Climate Change-Gender Risks and Hopes – A rapid response assessment*, UNEP, ICIMOD and CICERO.

¹³ Leduc, Brigitte (2010), "Adaptation to Climate Change-Why Gender makes a difference?" in *Gender Perspectives in Mountain Development-New Challenges & innovative approaches*, No 57 Summer 2010.

¹⁴ Kieran, Cooke (2013), Assam's women feel climate impacts, January 14.

based on a strong foundation of gender justice along with a rights based approach. If given the opportunity, women can play a significant role and can become an equal partner in climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. Take, for instance, women vegetable farmers in Jaintia hills of Meghalaya have started a new variety of cabbage and turmeric along with broom grass which can tolerate heavy and unseasonal rains. In Meghalaya's Ribhoi district, two women swidden farmers have started growing new cash crops like strawberry and ginger instead of beans as they are adapting to weather phenomenon and changing the crops which were grown earlier. In Bastar, Chhattisgarh, Gond and other areas, Adivasi women are entering into new vocations other than agriculture to increase their economic resilience, as they need a different occupation during periods of climate related disasters. More and more terracotta, metal and wood sculpture etc are now handled by tribal women.¹⁵

The altitude for growing "kolhar" is becoming increasingly harder for women farmers and women have to walk longer distances to even cut fodder for their livestock as it is no longer easily available in abundance. Moreover, men control the best land with the best soil to produce commercial crops whereas women control the marginal farmlands with very limited or no access to external inputs (fertilizers and credit) and inheritance laws, customary laws and cultural norms all favour men. Women's lack of land rights can not only reduce the well being of the family but also deprive her socially and culturally. There is a need to widen networks and livelihood options for women in the state.¹⁶ Women in the mountain regions are affected more by climate change as they have less access to infrastructure, markets and are more dependent on natural resources. However, they have the advantage of greater social mobility, less control of patriarchy and greater participation in activities outside their homes.¹⁷ These advantages, if cultivated, could work in their favour in future.

Besides India, many other countries are taking initiatives like a National Committee on Climate Change which was set up in Senegal has women in leadership positions. In Philippines, women farmers have been showing initiative by setting up community seed banks to promote sustainable agriculture. Liberia is promoting gender equality in infrastructure. In Mekong basin, women were involved in watershed management – as trainers, participants and target groups. In Central America i.e. in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico and Honduras, work has been going on to enlist and develop their knowledge in forest conservation.¹⁸ Socio-economic assessment of climate change on women at the local level, gender - needs assessment, gender – responsive budgeting etc need to be all undertaken in a systematic manner in the future.

Also in today's world, communication and early warning systems must be accessible to women. Agromet advisory service becomes gender blind as poor women rarely listen to radio or watch television. It is also important to involve women scientists who can present a gendered view of scientific data. Also local women have tremendous knowledge of local trees and crops, herbs and wild edible varieties, seed selection and seed storage, manure application, pest management, post

¹⁵ Kelkar, Govind (2009), *Adivasi Women-Engaging with Climate Change*, UNIFEM, IFAD and the Christensen Fund.

¹⁶ Kikhi, Chozule and Kikhi, Kedilezo (2009), *The Role of Women in Natural Resource Management – A Thematic Report*, UNDP-GOI Project, Government of Nagaland, Department of Planning and Coordination, Kohima.

¹⁷ Kelkar, Govind, Mountain Men & Women are impacted differently by climate change.

¹⁸ Skinner, Emmeline (2011), *op.cit.*

harvest processing and value addition etc – which is all part of the oral tradition. This needs to get factored in the data.¹⁹ This knowledge that women possess (about preservation and diversification) is ignored or undervalued. This should not be done. In the Garo hills of Meghalaya, women farmers practicing shifting cultivation manage 35 species of seeds.²⁰

Gender analysis requires proper collection, processing and reporting of sex-disaggregated data which is not happening. Fang Jiang argues that most data collected by the information systems of governments are not sex-disaggregated and thus it is very difficult to ascertain the commonalities and differences between men and women.²¹ Women need to be made responsible for future policy making and all action oriented schemes and programmes. They are already proving to be capable managers of disaster management.

Women need to act as active agents rather than passive victims of climate change and they should be viewed as part of the solution. There is also the need to give visibility of gender issues in international negotiations and pay more attention to gender-sensitive adaptive management.

To extend and consolidate research on this theme, a two-and-a-half-day international conference is being held in February 2014 at Jamia Millia Islamia. It is the second in the conference series at Centre for North East Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia on climate change and gender. The conference will gather scholars and professionals from a range of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas who are working in Eastern Himalaya on topics that fall within any of the following thematic areas:

1. Exploring the connections between gender rights, economic and environmental vulnerability, climate change and the way in which these are perceived and articulated;
2. Climate change and gender: Impacts and vulnerability;
3. Climate change and gender rights: Women's control over resources;
4. Climate change and gender sensitive adaptive management;
5. Women as active agents of change: Information and participation;
6. Enforcement of laws;
7. Women, patriarchy and equity;
8. Women's physical security in times of disasters/crisis;
9. Women's participation and voice;
10. Women vulnerability and the need for inclusive growth in Eastern Himalaya,
11. Uttarakhand; & Sikkim; and
12. Gender, literature and language

¹⁹ Kapoor, Aditi (2011), *op.cit.*

²⁰ Leduc, Brigitte (2010), *art.cit.*

²¹ Jiang, Fang (2010), " Gender Inequalities- the lack of gender-disaggregated data" in Gender Perspectives in Mountain Development- New Challenges and innovative approaches, *op.cit.*