

## EARTH DAY 2022

# GENDERED IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA



**Firewood is cheap, but the impact on women's health and indoor air is not factored in.**



**Floods in Colombo**

**MITALI NIKORE**

South Asia, a region which is home to nearly 1/4th of the global population, has now become a global hotspot, facing high human vulnerability to Climate Change, including frequent heat waves, cyclones, and other natural disasters, even if global warming is limited to the 1.5°C threshold, as per the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in February 2022.

South Asia faces a future where by 2050, nearly 246 million South Asians will reside in cities in cyclone-prone areas and more than 200 million will be forced to flee their homes if climate mitigation actions are not accelerated (WEF, 2016; UN Migration, 2020).

In this scenario, women, girls, and persons of minority genders face a “threat multiplier” that exacerbates these adverse impacts of Climate Change, not only during disaster events, but also threatening their daily lives and livelihoods.

### ACCESS RELIEF AND ASSISTANCE

Women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured during disasters owing to disparities in information, mobility, decision-making, access to resources and training, as well as social norms. For instance, Mayuri Bhattacharjee, founder of the Dignity in Disasters podcast, noted that over the years during floods in Assam, women refused to change from saris to salwar suits, despite saris constraining their mobility and ability to swim owing to social norms. In addition, women face a constant threat of sexual harassment at disaster relief centres and camps. They are less able to access relief and assistance, further threatening their well-being and recovery, and exacerbating this vicious cycle of vulnerability to future disasters (UN Women, 2022).

Ranging from 55% in India to nearly 74% in Nepal, women are predominantly dependent on agriculture and other primary sector activities for their livelihood in South Asia. They form an overwhelming majority of the agricultural workforce, mainly working as low wage agricultural labour (World Bank, 2019; Nikore *et. al.*, 2022).

With Climate Change, increasing frequency of droughts and floods, extreme temperatures, and

reduced water availability are likely to reduce agricultural yields and productivity (FAO, 2022). This places the majority of women in South Asia at risk of reduced wages or loss of livelihood altogether.

Traditionally, women also bear the primary responsibility for water collection across South Asian countries. For instance, in India, close to 54% of rural women – as well as some adolescent girls – spend an estimated 35 minutes getting water every day, equivalent to the loss of 27 days’ wages over a year. (UNICEF, 2016). With increasing water scarcity and more frequent dry spells, women need to travel longer distances to fetch water, thereby increasing their time poverty. In extreme cases, such as in few parts of Western India, this has also led to the phenomenon of “water wives”, i.e. where a man is found to be marrying more than one woman as his wife gets older, and is unable to keep up with the growing burden of water collection.

Out of the 2.6 billion people exposed to polluting cooking materials like chulhas, open fires, kerosene or coal-based stoves globally, almost 780 million are in South Asia (WHO, 2019). Given that cooking and fuel gathering are predominantly women’s responsibility in South Asia, this places women at a disproportionate risk of health complications due to indoor air pollution, including stroke, ischaemic heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer.

### CLEANER COOKING METHODS

While in India, about 36% of the population relies on polluting cooking methods, the proportions are far higher in Bangladesh (77%), Nepal (69%), Sri Lanka (69%) and Pakistan (51%). Moreover, despite a global and regional push towards cleaner cooking methods, COVID-19 has erased decades of progress, and made transitions to cleaner fuels more difficult most particularly in South Asia as most households are unable to afford electronic cooking methods (Pachauri *et. al.*, 2021).

Climate Change heightens the risk of disaster-linked displacement, and associated losses in household incomes, contributing to increasing girls’ vulnerability to child marriage. Studies have found high prevalence of child marriage in coastal communities of Bangladesh, chronically impacted by increased salinity and coastal flooding, as well

as amongst communities impacted by flooding, cyclones, and river erosion. Similar studies in West Bengal, India found a 133% increase in the cases of reported child marriages in the districts surrounding the Sundarbans region between 2019 and 2020 coinciding with the rise in sea levels in the cyclone-prone areas, as well as the fall in tourism owing to the COVID-19 pandemic (Athar, 2021).

This disproportionate impact of Climate Change on women, girls and persons of minority genders necessitates a move away from gender blind to gender responsive climate resilient ecosystems. Governments can consider a host of policy actions to mainstream gender considerations in climate mitigation and adaptation actions including: Formulating clear guidelines to ensure women’s representation in decision making and leadership for disaster risk planning at national, state, district, block and local levels; Devising strategies at sectoral, and state / district level to enhance women’s employability and reduce dependence on agriculture sector; Financing and scaling-up ground-level solutions devised by women’s self-help groups, and women-led community-based organisations on water conservation and distribution; Incentivising women’s entrepreneurship, especially in the clean energy sector, and promoting use of clean cooking equipment; Collecting gender disaggregated data to assess impact of climate linked disasters; Providing additional financial support to women survivors of climate linked disasters; Targeting benefits of post disaster rehabilitation schemes through women household members; and devising institutional mechanisms to harness women’s traditional knowledge about ecosystem management and conservation to preserve ecological balance.

Yesterday (April 22), the world celebrated its Fifty Second Earth Day, with the theme “Invest in Our Planet.” We hope this article serves as a reminder that these investments need to be viewed with a gender lens, so that women can also be leaders of a green recovery and rebuilding effort and play an equal role in determining the future of “our planet.”

*(Along with Mitali Nikore, this article has been co-authored by Vidhi Narang and Areen Deshmukh)*

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