



## ADDRESSING GENDER CONCERNS IN ADAPTATION DISCOURSE: LEADERSHIP AWAITS BANGLADESH

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It is widely acknowledged that the negative effects of climate change are likely to hit the poorest people in the poorest countries hardest. In climate change discourse, attempts to link gender and climate change may seem rather far-fetched. There have been a few publications to establish this linkage. Most of the approaches toward tackling the threats of climate change on scientific and technological aspects of the problem, ignoring the social issue<sup>1</sup>.

Even Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) focuses on “systems” rather than people<sup>2</sup>, writes about power plants rather than consumption, ignoring the gender insights in the discourse. After years of relentless efforts by women professionals and activists, it is now accepted that women are among the most vulnerable groups to the impacts of climate change. However, if the underlying reasons of women’s (and men’s) specific vulnerabilities are not analysed and addressed properly, the effect will remain merely rhetorical. For a rough overview, the main factors and forms of discrimination of women are gender division of labor, different access to income and economic resources, difference in power, consequences of cultural patterns and social norms (without going into specific vulnerabilities of men, since these still need to be better analysed).

Gender, or the distinct roles assigned to men and women, is a critical part of all development initiatives. A gender analysis is not a special focus on women, but rather, an understanding on how discrimination against women and gender roles interact to shape men and women’s enjoyment of human dignity, rights, as well as quality of living. In the context of climate change, a ‘gender analysis’ promotes an understanding of the ways that men and women are differently impacted by climate-related hazards and by adopting adaptation and mitigation strategies. This also helps to promote the avenues how women and men will be involved as active agents to accentuate mitigation efforts and towards responding to gender friendly adaptation modalities.

### Why and How Women Are Differently Vulnerable? Bangladesh Context<sup>3</sup>

Both in developed and developing countries women are primary caregivers, combining the care for the children and elderly with their domestic and income earning activities. These additional responsibilities place additional burdens on women impacting their ability to work outside the home and to deal with the effects generated by environmental changes caused by global warming. In a traditional society like Bangladesh women are even more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because they are often not allowed to participate in the public share, and are therefore less likely to receive critical information for emergency preparedness. They are also less mobile due to strict gender codes of social behavior, and have lesser

<sup>1</sup> Masika, R., (ed), 2002, Gender and Development: An Oxfam Journal, Volume 10 Number 2, Oxfam, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., IPCC’s definition of vulnerability in the TAR: Vulnerability is the degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change, including climate variability and extremes. Vulnerability is a function of the character, magnitude, and rate of climate change and variation to which a system is exposed, its sensitivity, and its adaptive capacity. (IPCC 2001, p.6)

<sup>3</sup> This sub-section heavily draws from Ahmed, A.U., Neelormi, S. and Adri, N., 2007. Climate Change in Bangladesh: Concerns Regarding Women and Special Vulnerable Groups, Centre for Global Change (CGC), Dhaka.

chances to escape from affected areas. Most climate change issues, policies and programs are not gender neutral. In light of this, several areas deserve attention, specifically: gender specific resource-use patterns; gender-specific effects of climate change; gender aspects of mitigation and adaptation; gender and decision-making on climate change; women's capacity to cope with climate change; and gender related pattern of vulnerability.

In Bangladesh, **cyclone** is a natural disaster for which strong warning system has already been in place. Women in the coastal areas are aware of the issuance of warnings but the design and the insecure environment of the cyclone shelters in Bangladesh is not found gender-friendly, as reported by coastal vulnerable women. The capacity of these shelters is found to be very inadequate and decreasing with further increasing population. Women report that there are cases of sexual harassment on the way to shelters, sometimes abortion and miscarriages take place in the shelters only because of the crowded condition. The very design of the shelter does not provide minimum sanitation facility. During post cyclone period, intra household food insecurity and sanitation become the major problems for the women.

**Water logging** compels women to stay in marooned conditions for several months a year causing severe skin diseases, gynecological problems to innumerable numbers of women of those affected areas. Collection of fuel and potable water become extremely hazardous. Women can not send their children to schools during prolonged water logging. Land based production system is almost absent in waterlogged areas and the dire poverty situation leads to hampering the social fabric, women often are forced to go for anti-social works just to feed their child and their family as a desperate effort.

Under the present climate change variability, **salinity ingress** becomes a major problem for the people of south western region of Bangladesh. During the dry season, salinity is more intense and lack of suitable drinking water becomes an acute problem for the community. Women and adolescent girls are usually required to fetch drinking water from distant sources, even 5-6 kilometers each day in some southern areas. Even during their pregnancy women are forced to fetch water from whatever the distance is. Women and girls suffer from various gynecological problems in the long run for taking over extra hurdle of work in their daily life and by using saline water during menstruation. Abortion, still births are reported in alarmingly high numbers in these areas.

Among those affected by **floods** and related problems, women and children are usually the most helpless and disadvantaged. Flood related deaths are often caused by drowning and snake bites, which, tend to occur in increasing numbers for children, following by adult women. Destitute women, without any employment, and compelled to migrate elsewhere, face the most acute conditions of physical and social insecurity. Poor women find it extremely difficult to ensure food and drinking water security when they struggle to live in flooded condition. In deeply flooded areas young girls are reportedly scrounging for edible reeds and roots, while women of all ages travel long distances by boat or raft to fetch drinking water. In most cases, water sources become contaminated with pathogens and because of lack of fuel water can not be boiled, which trigger wide scale spread of water borne diseases.

**During flood** (in Waterlogged condition also) women's privacy seems to be completely challenged, sanitation becomes worse especially in case of pregnant women. During floods, adolescent girls report perinea rashes and urinary tract infections because they are not able to wash out menstrual rags to dry, or access to clean water. Moving on the embankments or road side high lands often put the adult and young women in constant dangers of sexual harassment and assault. Women headed household in these areas are increasing in numbers as



the male counter parts leave the flooded area to a higher land for employment opportunities, and often they never come back to the family. Even in case of flash floods food insecurity, sanitation are the issues for the affected women.

**River bank erosion, charland erosion, coastal bank erosion** are very common in Bangladesh. In erosion prone areas, women are concerned regarding loss of homesteads, loss of housing for months and years, physical insecurity, loss of self as well as family esteem, lack of production opportunities, and lack of food insecurity in the aftermath of the event. Women headed households are increasing in numbers as the male member of the family goes outside of the area for exploring job opportunities and often they never come back and take the responsibility of the family, causing enormously extra burden and vulnerability to the women with little kids. It is the women in the family who can not leave her family unfed and unguarded. Erosion leaves nothing for the affected people. In the dire poverty situation, trafficking is also very common. Out migration is the only coping in erosion, if this desperation is titled as 'coping'.

Bangladesh regularly faces **agricultural drought**. The entire western part of the country is drought prone, though the problem is acute in central-western and north-western regions. In the drought prone areas the major concern of local women include food insecurity, problem in collecting drinking water, and outbreaks of diseases. Difficulties to maintain homestead vegetable garden, manage water and fodder for the livestock severely hamper their lives.

**Urban flood** coupled with drainage congestion is emerging as one of the major concerns these days. The slum dwellers are the worst victims of urban drainage congestion. Slum dwelling women make their living mostly by finding self employment as temporary housemaids (in Bangla, they are called *Thika Jhee*). If the shanty dwelling is inundated, it becomes difficult to join in daily activities in employers' households while trying to safeguard her belongings. Creating an alternate temporary safe haven for the kids also becomes a necessity. Delay or absence in the job often is translated into loss of employment, with counterproductive results on food security. Many slum dwelling women are self employed as food producers and /or food vendors, especially targeting rickshaw pullers as their customers they face enormous hardship during these days. Collecting safe drinking water appears as the biggest challenge for women as they are the responsible actors for this.



## Climate Change: Adding Up to Already Existing Hurdles

Food insecurity, hurdle to collect safe drinking water, sanitation problem as well as health hazards, mental and physical trauma during and post disaster period are the cross cutting problems in almost all the vulnerability contexts. Bangladeshi people are familiar with climate induced hazards for a long time and as a result they have developed unique coping practices against such hazards. Since agriculture has a profound impact on the economy of the country, farmers always practice their self innovative coping mechanism for survival. Millennia old traditional knowledge plays a significant role towards modifying and adjusting coping practices. As women are differently vulnerable than men under climate variability, they also have developed their own coping mechanisms. Many of their practices are needs-based, appear to be so obvious. However, these apparently 'obvious' practices have all passed the true test of time and have contributed immensely to reduce their vulnerability against vagaries of nature. Women have a strong body of traditional knowledge, which is used in disaster mitigation and adaptation. Proper acknowledgement of the contribution of women, protection and financial support should be available to sustain and develop this knowledge. Technologies should be properly adapted where desirable to women's needs.

In the nexus between poverty and climate change, Sustenance of decent living under invigorated extreme weather events must be severely questioned, especially in countries such as Bangladesh where pervasive poverty is prevailing. Frequently occurring natural hazards and occasional disasters are perceived to be the major causes of the perpetuation of poverty in Bangladesh. Despite utmost efforts to reduce the net fraction of population under poverty by achieving MDGs and so on, there is a strong likelihood that the overall poverty level will remain at the same level, if not deteriorate further, due to adverse impacts of climate change on poor and marginally better off people.

### Addressing Gender Concerns in Adaptation Programs

The Government of Bangladesh has allocated 100 million USD as climate fund for 2009-2010. The initiative is a pioneering one to challenge climate change through enhancing people's adaptive capacity. The ministry of Environment and Forest is already in the process of scrutinizing the proposals for on ground adaptation. Government agencies as well as NGOs and CBOs have been invited to participate in this process. It is the high time to address gender concern in these programs, a real leadership awaiting Bangladesh.

The government must ensure mainstreaming of gender perspectives into national policies, action plans and other response measures on sustainable development and climate change by carrying out systematic gender analysis, collecting and utilizing sex-disaggregated data, establishing gender-sensitive indicators, criteria and benchmarks, and developing practical tools to support and monitor the programs in a gender-sensitive way. **For every conceived adaptation measure, a gender-sensitivity analysis must be made mandatory to ensure that women's differential needs and priorities are adequately addressed along with those of the rest of the community.**

To ensure this, the following steps need to be taken:

- Address the lack of disaggregated data by gender in the area of climate change. International human rights standards and principles underline the need to adequately assess and address the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change.
- Gender-specific vulnerability assessments are important element in determining adaptation options. Vulnerability should be assessed through the eyes of vulnerable themselves and here separate consultations with the women in a vulnerable



- community appear extremely important to unearth **gender-differential vulnerability and gender-sensitive adaptive responses.**
- building the capacity of women to have the skills and confidence to engage with climate change debates at the local, national, regional and international levels (for example through advocacy training) in order to entrench gender in local, national and international policies and measures.
  - Identify the contributions of **women as agents of change** in adaptation to climate change at the local level.
  - **Assess women's differential vulnerability** within a given geo-physical, socio-economic and institutional context.
  - Take steps to **reduce the differential vulnerability of women.**
  - **Increase the participation of women representing vulnerable communities** or vulnerable women in assessing their vulnerability and in decision making on climate change adaptation at different levels.
  - **Build the capacity of women** to design and implement **adaptation programs beyond their household activities.**
  - Ensure that adaptation policies and measures are directly targeting and benefitting vulnerable women and as such, ensure that **no less than 30% of the adaptation fund is earmarked for the programs directly targeting and benefitting vulnerable women.**
  - **Build the capacity of organizations working on "gender and adaptation issues"** at the local level, particularly local government institutions where women's direct participation is ensured.
  - Monitor the status of vulnerable women and **respond to their changing needs and priorities.**

***CREATE A MECHANISM THROUGH WHICH GENDER AUDIT CAN BE  
REGULARLY DONE AND MONITORED***

Future adaptation and/or agriculture policies need to be informed by more research into the adaptation strategies of women in the face of existing climate change impacts on agricultural productivity and food security, including how these are manifested in different contexts. Barriers to women's access to new technologies, extension services and credit facilities need to be established. Aspects of their own agricultural knowledge that have been overlooked and could contribute to effective adaptation, what women are already doing and what they identify as their needs and priorities have to be established in order to inform all policies and interventions. Of importance as well is introducing and supporting diversification of food crops and livestock depending on the local situation.

**Institutional Adaptation Vs Community Based Adaptation**

Large-scale adaptation efforts are often beyond the capacity of local communities and hence supported by state run agencies and institutions, including policies. Institutional adaptations are often government supported public initiatives. In contrast, community based adaptation (CBA) to climate change is a community led process. In both cases, effectiveness of adaptation depends on communities' priorities and needs, knowledge, capacities, and state of empowerment of people to plan for and cope with the adverse impacts. CBA can complement institutional adaptation through enhancing household/community level resilience. While the supportive roles of CBA are acknowledged, CBA alone cannot ensure lasting resilience building efforts without appropriate institutional facilitations.

It is widely acknowledged that any cut in public expenditure has a direct impact on poor and marginal groups, among which women are the most disadvantaged group. In addition to



financing, policy support towards creation of access for women to knowledge, skills and resources would be necessary to optimize benefits for them. Increasing effort for institutional adaptation, supplemented by community based adaptation, would lead to a greater resilience, which would in turn contribute in reducing vulnerability at micro and macro levels.

### **Technology Transfer MUST NOT Increase Tech Divide**

The article that relates to Adaptation Technology is **Article 4.5** which refers to promoting, facilitating and financing transfer of environmentally sound technologies and know-how” to enable developing countries to implement provisions of the convention. These technologies include adaptation technologies as well as the technologies for reducing GHG emissions.

Technological developments related to climate change should *take in to account women’s specific priorities and needs and make full use of their knowledge and expertise including traditional practices*. Women’s involvement in the development of new technologies can ensure that they are *user friendly, effective and sustainable*. Women should have also *equal access to training, credit and skill-development programs* to ensure their full participation in climate change initiatives.

Because of women’s differential access to knowledge, institutional support, technological know-how, there is an obvious technology divide within the societies, especially in developing countries. *We recognize technology needs for women as of highest order*. We also recognize women’s indigenous knowledge towards enhancing adaptive capacity. Needs assessment for any tech transfer must be strictly scrutinized in consultation with the direct stakeholders and with vulnerable women as well. Technology to be transferred to the community or country must take into consideration that it is at least benign to women. *Capacity building of stakeholder women before transfer of the technology must be a prerequisite*.

*Technology screening tools* must be developed and application of these tools must be made mandatory to foster tech transfer. We emphasize that, technical feasibility of the technology to be transferred is not enough. It should consider *economic performance, social acceptability and gender friendliness*.

Funding process for tech transfer must have separate financial provision for capacity building of women towards optimizing adaptation performance, so that the *existing technology divide can be eliminated*.

### **Call for Changing Life Style**

Women are not homogenous and we must acknowledge that the women from global south and north are not on the same turf. When my women are lacking basic energy services, in order to enable them to utilize better energy services, a space must be created in the global commons. The only way we may succeed if unnecessary and luxury emissions are cut in the Annex-I countries. Annex-I energy policy must be realigned to address this inequity.

In the name of low carbon economy, it is not acceptable that poor women from the south will be asked to cut their Emissions. Depriving women in LDCs and Africa for long from basic energy services and not taking an iota of any initiative to enhance their capacity to use improved energy technologies, it is completely unethical to ask them to facilitate low-emission growth curve for the global commons.

### **Be Aware! Tricky Effort to connect Population Growth with Climate Change**