

## *Women's action towards climate resilience for urban poor in South Asia*



# Climate Change: *Impact on Women*

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## **Climate Change and the Urban Poor**

Climate change is considered as one of the major environmental threats facing the world, the impacts of which are manifested through increase in the incidence of extreme events like floods and famine. The risk of climatic hazard for the urban poor are often even greater, aggravated partly due to their limited access to basic infrastructure and services and partly due to their lower adaptive capacity, given their precarious livelihood. Those living in informal settlements often have no option but to settle in hazards prone areas with unsafe housing and lack of basic infrastructure such as water supply, electricity and sanitation.

Economically, they may not have savings that they can draw on over time, and small shocks may keep them in a vicious cycle where they cannot move beyond coping to adaptation. Lack of safety nets and social support systems, such as health insurance, as well as the lack of property rights and tenure

further contribute to the vulnerability of the urban poor.

## **Impact on Women: the burden of responsibility**

A gendered approach to Climate Change should not simply be about women but also about the youth and children on the communities. Because of gender inequalities, women and girls are differently vulnerable as women are also the majority of the world's poor and are more often responsible for cooking and cleaning, family health, and management of natural resources—areas that are relevant to Climate Change.

Women from poor communities are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood and are therefore, more affected by

Climate Change. Women in rural areas have the major responsibility for drawing water and energy for cooking and drinking in the house, as well as cooking all meals every day. ***As Climate Change is expected to majorly affect water resources, energy and food security, women are more likely to be impacted.***

## Drawbacks of Health

Women are more vulnerable to health problems in India, as in most families, they only eat after their husband and children, often being the last to eat in the house. Women will also be negatively affected by extreme climate changes like droughts and uncertain rainfall. The role of fetching domestic and drinking water already has women in many rural areas walking kilometres with heavy pots. As water security further declines, they will have to fetch more and more water, affecting physical strength and health. ***50% of the women and girls in India are anaemic and prone to malnutrition and this situation is more likely to worsen.***

In addition, agriculture as a sector will be hit by Climate variabilities. With more than 80% of the women in India are involved in agriculture, it is their livelihoods which will take the major brunt of Climate Change. Women's limited access to resources and decision-making processes further increases their vulnerability to Climate Change.

## Diseases in children and teens

Climate Change is also expected to increase malaria epidemics and spread of other diseases that spread through insects that breed in standing water. This increase will have a severe impact on women who often have less access to medical services than men. Women's workload also increases as they spend time caring for the sick. Women are likely to suffer more from shortages of food and other resources in the aftermath of disasters, unless gender considerations are taken into account in disaster management programs as they tend to feed the children first.

These diseases are spread easily in children and youth as they tend to be more fatal for younger children with weaker immunity as they lack the

nutrition owing to financial constraints. Because of large scale poverty, teens are unlikely to get medical attention in time as infants are prioritized and it can be a threat to their life.

## HOW DOES IT AFFECT THEM?

### Vulnerability to Natural Disasters

Women are vulnerable and more likely to be impacted than men in case of natural extreme disasters. When disasters strike, they hurt whole communities – but women often bear the brunt. Floods frequently claim far more female victims because their mobility is restricted and they have not been taught to swim. Due to financial constraints, the youth are often neglected, irrespective of their gender, in being taught life skills such as driving, swimming, etc.

Women suffer from neglect and uneducated youth not having been taught to swim, clothing restricting mobility and cultural norms regarding the preservation of female honour causing many women to leave their homes too late because they waited for a male escort.

Men are able to warn each other of the danger as they meet in public spaces, but only convey the information back to their families sporadically. Gender inequality often affects women's access to information and communications which could ensure their safety, and the safety of their dependants, i.e. the children and teens.

### Coastal Zones and Sea Level rise

A sea level rise leads to flooding in most low lying cities which causes population displacement and the displaced women are likely to face many health consequences- infections, nutrition problems, psychological challenges. Another major issue, which the women in the coastal belt would be vulnerable to, is the question of sanitation. Monsoons and flooding by the sea causes large scale water logging creating major sanitation problems, particularly for women.

### Decline in agriculture

Whether involved in agriculture or not, women in both rural and urban areas have a key role as



providers of food for their families, and so the effects of Climate Change either directly on food production, or indirectly on food prices, are of particular relevance to women.

Further, as food prices rise, in poor households, there tends to be a reduction in the quality or quantity of the food they are able to purchase, with women and teenagers most likely to make sacrifices as the men of the family are seen as the breadwinners and have to maintain their physical strength. Decreased food availability is often managed at the expense of the most vulnerable groups of households - especially women and girl children. Women constitute 70 - 80% of the agriculture workforce, they will be the first to lose their livelihoods in affected communities. Although 70% of farmers are women, but they often have little access to decision making structures and their needs can be different from men's as they are more likely to rely on rain fed agriculture, supplemented by small-scale or hand irrigation.

### Water Shortage and lack of sanitation

Women and young boys and girls tend to labour to provide water for household needs, such as cooking, washing, hygiene and raising small livestock. During a scenario of increased water stress, women and girls may have to walk further to collect water, leaving even less time for other activities, such as education and good jobs. Failure to collect sufficient water, or complete other household tasks, sometimes results in verbal or physical abuse from other family members. The longer walks can increase the risk of harassment or sexual assault, particularly in conflict zones. In urban areas, time commitments can also increase through long hours waiting at communal water points.

Because of women's largely unrecognised role in domestic and productive water usage, it is important to further involve women and the educated youth of the community in decision making in water management, in particular with the increased water shortage due to Climate Change.

### Human Health

Climate Change presents threat to public health security from extreme weather-related disasters to wider spread of such vector-borne diseases as malaria and dengue. Women and young girls also face barriers to accessing healthcare services due to

a lack of economic assets to pay for healthcare, as well as cultural restrictions on their going out alone which may prohibit them from travelling to seek healthcare.

Another aspect of the health impacts of Climate Change is that women and the young members of the family are generally expected to care for the sick and elderly. This limits the time they have available for income generation which, when coupled with the rising medical costs associated with family illness, heightens levels of poverty. In addition, being faced with the burden of caring for dependents while being obliged to travel further for water or firewood makes women and girls prone to stress-related illnesses.

### Heat Waves

While high temperatures affect everyone, elderly, children and women in particular will be more vulnerable to it. Elderly women are likely to be particularly vulnerable, especially in poor families with little to no savings. Access is further restricted for older women living in rural areas, unable to travel the long distances to reach a health facility. Women and children spending their time outdoors have no access to cooling devices and are likely to be negatively affected by extreme heat waves. Teenagers and children from slums study in government institutions where the fans may not work and there may not even be drinking water which threatens the health of the youth of the community.

## WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Women are not simply victims and can be agents of change. They have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in Climate Change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies. Women's responsibilities in households and communities as managers of natural resources has positioned them well for livelihood strategies adapted to changing environmental realities. There is a lack of women in decision-making bodies on sustainable development, including on Climate Change, and this affects their ability to contribute their unique and valuable perspectives and expertise

on Climate Change. **Soliciting and encouraging their leadership to address Climate Change and inform policy is one way to ensure that a gender perspective is included; without this, climate policies could fail to be effective.**

agriculture and fisheries, biodiversity and ecosystem services, health, industry, human settlements, disaster management, and conflict and security. Gender inequality in access to resources, including credit, extension services, information and technology, must be taken into account in developing mitigation activities.

There are thus, important gender perspectives in all aspects of Climate Change. Adaptation efforts should address gender-specific impacts of Climate Change in the areas of energy, water, food security,



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*“Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) aims to build capacities of women from slum communities to take lead in resilience action against heat stress, extreme precipitation events, water scarcity and contamination and vector borne diseases. The proposed community based resilience model will be women-led, integrated; evidence based, and will focus on innovative communication strategies to promote a culture of resilience action.”*