

GENDER & CLIMATE CHANGE INDUCED IMPACTS

ON WOMEN'S/GIRLS' PSYCHOSOCIAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, AND NUTRITION SECURITY CONDITION IN ASIA REGION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change in South and Southeast Asia is either experienced as slow onset change or fast onset change (IPCC, 2022). Slow onset changes are characterized by continuous increasing temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns with significant impact on water flows and, hence, water availability. Fast onset climate change impacts consist of more frequent and severe natural disasters, such as cyclones, floods, and landslides.

While climate change has impacted millions of people in the region, **women and girls have been disproportionately impacted, largely due to pre-existing vulnerabilities**. Women and girls are more sensitive to the impact of climate change given their traditional gender roles as well as more exposed to climate change with simultaneous low capacities to adapt, which makes them, overall, much more vulnerable to fast and slow onset climate change impacts (UN Women, 2022; WB, 2022a; UNEP *et al.*, 2020). Women in South and Southeast Asia, particularly in Afghanistan,

Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan, have less representation and decision-making power in governance processes and structures that are involved in the development and implementation of climate change adaptation and mitigation policies (ICIMOD *et al.*, 2022; UNEP *et al.*, 2020). They have less access to information and early warning of impending climate-related events, leading to increased injuries and fatalities (UNFCCC, 2022; ARC, 2017).

This research drew on a desk review of literature, stakeholder interviews, and FGDs. **The findings show a strong causal link between climate change impacts and the psychosocial, socio-economic, and nutrition security conditions of women and girls across South and Southeast Asia**. More so, the research demonstrates that climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and emphasizes the already-limited access of women and girls to resources and opportunities, resulting in their basic needs not being met even before a climate-induced event.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND LIVELIHOODS

Women and girls in the region, particularly those in rural areas, rely on small-scale agriculture and livestock as well as natural resources for their livelihoods and have fewer alternative opportunities, including access to formal employment or finance. Climate change is affecting livelihoods, particularly in agriculture, fishing, and livestock production (IPCC, 2022). Fast and slow onset climate change, such as cyclones in Bangladesh and increasing temperatures in the Himalayas, has resulted in a significant decrease in agricultural yield, fish stocks, and the productivity of livestock (IPCC, 2022). The loss of crops, fisheries, and livestock due to climate change can lead to increased food insecurity and poverty, further exacerbating existing gender inequalities. In general, women across the region have fewer safety nets, such as land, property, and other assets, and are less capable of adapting to these changes to agriculture production systems (OHCHR & UN Women, 2020).

In the face of economic challenges and food insecurity, **many households are resorting to various coping strategies, which include the out-migration of men** (Slavchevska *et al.*, 2020). This has inevitably shifted traditional gender roles and power dynamics at the household and community levels. However, it has also increased the work burden of women and girls, where they are now responsible for earning a

wage in addition to their household responsibilities. Women are also increasingly migrating to urban centres and even abroad, but sometimes, however, facing protection issues, such as trafficking (UN Women, 2022; Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Plan International, 2021). While migration can bring economic relief in some cases, migration can also lead to stress, trauma, and mental health problems due to the loss of community and familiar surroundings.

Households are also employing more and more harmful practices, such as **using chemical fertilizers, taking out loans that they are unable to repay, pulling girls out of school, and child marriage** (APWLD, 2022; (IPCC, 2022; UNFCCC, 2022; GiHA, 2021; Women Deliver, 2021). In general, girls are deprived of schooling due to the costs, longer distances, and access to water and sanitation facilities in schools, and gender norms often prioritize the formal education of boys (Kabir *et al.*, 2016; ICIMOD *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, 2016). Child marriage, in particular, is extremely high across the Asia region and is used to reduce the financial burden on the family, because girls are already out of school for a prolonged period, and as a form of protection against the sexual violence of unmarried girls, especially in cases of displacement in a climate-related event (UNICEF, 2022; HRW, 2015; Spink, 2020; UNFCCC, 2022; Dewi & Dartanto, 2018).

FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

With the changes in agricultural productivity (including reduced agricultural yield and disrupted food supply chains), food and nutrition security are impacted, which have long-term health impacts on women and girls, particularly those who are pregnant or breastfeeding (Action Against Hunger, n.d.; IPCC, 2022; FAO, 2016; Nishat, 2016; UNICEF, 2016; Women Deliver, 2021). South Asia, in particular, already exhibits **a high burden of maternal and child malnutrition**, which will be exacerbated further by climate change, leading to higher child stunting, child wasting,

and nutritional deficiencies in women (UNICEF, 2023). To cope, households are changing their diet and consumption patterns, with women more likely to eat less or skip meals in favour of other family members (UN Women, 2022; Gentle & Maraseni, 2012). In Afghanistan, some households are taking extreme measures to reduce the family's food intake by, for example, giving their children sleeping pills or opium to suppress their hunger and help them sleep (NRC, 2021; IMC, 2022; Hedayatullah, 2019).

WATER AND SANITATION

As water sources dry up or become increasingly saline, **women and girls are having to travel farther and spend more time collecting water** (Kabir *et al.*, 2016; ICIMOD *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, 2016). The distance, along with poor quality water, such as the high salinity found largely in coastal areas, has been linked with health issues, such as uterine prolapse, hypertension, and preeclampsia (WOREC & ARROW, 2015; Khan *et al.*, 2014). With poor access to water and sanitation, women and girls, especially adolescent and youth girls, are less capable of managing their **menstrual health** (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021; Sawas & Bose, 2021; UN Women and IUCN, 2022). They often resort to negative practices, such as using dirty cloths, leading to infections (Morrison *et al.*, 2018). Women and girls also have to deal with socio-cultural taboos and stigmas related to their menstruation, resulting in certain restrictions or segregation,

which can be increasingly challenging in emergency shelters or camps where space and privacy are significant issues (Nishat, 2016; Roy, 2017; Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). In these situations, women and girls are sometimes taking contraceptive pills to change their menstrual cycle, delaying their toilet use, or practicing open defecation (Drolet *et al.*, 2015). Overall, the lack of access to clean water as well as safe and private sanitation facilities has also made these women and girls more susceptible to protection issues, such as **gender-based violence** (GBV), as well as public health issues, such as **waterborne and vector-borne (mosquito-borne) diseases**, such as leptospirosis, typhoid, dengue, cholera, and acute watery diarrhoea (ICIMOD, 2021; GiHA, 2021; Memon, 2020; IPCC, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2022; Naveed *et al.*, 2022; Patel *et al.*, 2019; WB, 2022a).

HEALTH

South and Southeast Asia is already plagued by poor access to healthcare (Zaidi *et al.*, 2017; UNFPA, 2018). In a climate-induced event, access to healthcare is further restricted due to destroyed infrastructure and disrupted transportation, similar to education (Hamidazada *et al.*, 2019; Plan International, 2021). Pregnancy and childbirth, including safe delivery and pre- and post-natal care, are largely affected, with reports of infertility, premature babies, miscarriages, and other cognitive and non-cognitive issues related

to children, linked not only to access to healthcare but also food intake, work burden, and psychological state (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019; Husaini & Davies, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2016; Chang *et al.*, 2022). The findings also suggest that climate change can cause hormonal changes and accelerated puberty (Rothschild & Haase, 2022; Resurrección *et al.*, 2019; Fisher & Eugster, 2015). The supply of contraception is often diminished during a climate-induced event (Husaini & Davies, 2022).

MOBILITY

The restricted mobility of women and girls, combined with less access to information and early warnings, makes women and girls at a **higher risk of injuries and fatalities from a climate-induced event** (GiHA, 2021; Neumayer and Plümper, 2007; ARC, 2017; Sawas & Bose, 2021). The findings show, for example, that women often rely on their husbands for decision-making

and are responsible for taking care of other household members, resulting in them evacuating last or not at all (Kabir *et al.*, 2016). In certain countries, the traditional clothing worn by women and their inability to swim put them in even more danger (Nahar *et al.*, 2014; Jordan, 2019; Sawas & Bose, 2021).

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

Climate change impacts on mental health and psychosocial well-being are multifaceted and create significant long-term changes among communities.

In general, people fear disasters and are traumatized after the event (Susteren *et al.*, 2017). The loss of income and property as well as lives has a tremendous impact on entire family units, with many people reportedly experiencing anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and feelings of hopelessness (WHO, 2022; Rataj *et al.*, 2016; Lawrance *et al.*, 2022). On the one hand, the economic losses can increase the psychological stress of men, of whom some reportedly resort to alcohol and substance abuse and sometimes domestic violence, affecting women and girls (Bradley *et al.*, 2021; Standing *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, when men migrate, the women are forced to bear

increasing responsibilities and demands and feel social separation, leading to elevated distress (WHO, 2022b; Spink, 2020; Memon, 2020). With the higher risks of GBV, women and girls report fear and shame when trying to access water and sanitation facilities, and families feel they cannot protect their children (Nishat, 2016; Memon, 2020). Families also report worries that the consequences of climate change are impacting the marriage prospects of women and girls (Jordan, 2019; HRW, 2015). Mental health disorders and psychological issues also affect people's resilience at all levels - community, family, and individual. Overall, across the Asia region, there are limited services available to help people, especially women and girls, manage their mental health and psychosocial well-being.

INTERSECTIONALITY

This research also looked into the intersectionality of women, where **specific groups of women are often being marginalized further in the face of climate change** due to stigmas around their social status, such as Dalit women in India and Nepal, or other socio-demographic factors, such as women and women-headed households in Afghanistan and Bangladesh (UN Women, 2020;

NCDHR, 2015; Gyawali *et al.*, 2016; Hamidazada *et al.*, 2019; Nahar *et al.*, 2014; Jordan, 2019). This has, for example, affected these women's access to services and opportunities, including during relief and recovery, and contributed to them remaining in a continuous poverty cycle (Gyawali *et al.*, 2016; NCDHR, 2015; Hamidazada *et al.*, 2019; Nahar *et al.*, 2014; Jordan, 2019).

It is evident that climate change affects women and girls in South and Southeast Asia disproportionately.

These impacts are multifaceted and have, in many cases, increased the pre-existing vulnerabilities of women and girls. Based on the findings of this research, this report provides various recommendations for government, international and national organizations, and communities. These include ensuring the availability of climate change information and communications, enhancing economic opportunities, providing access to climate-resilient systems and services, developing gender-responsive and participatory climate change adaptation strategies as well as disaster relief and preparedness plans, tapping into indigenous and religious practices around climate change, and addressing labour migration and GBV in the context of climate change.

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