



## Women and Climate Change in Bangladesh: An Analysis From Gender Perspective

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### Abstract

Climate change is not a gender neutral phenomenon. A gender perspective must urgently be integrated into the climate debate. This study examines the impacts of climate change from the gender perspective. The result shows that climate change is having a disproportionate impact on women in Bangladesh. Women suffer more than men during and after climatic disasters. It concludes with some suggestions for the mitigation and adoption to climate change.

**Key words:** Women; Climate change; Gender; Bangladesh.

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### INTRODUCTION

Climate change is now a global security issue. It represents a serious challenge to sustainable development, social justice, equity, and respect for human rights for both current and future generations (Aguilar, 2009). The effects of climate change vary among regions, and between different generations, income groups and occupations as well as between women and men (Shanta, 2009). The impacts of climate change are predicted to fall largely and disproportionately on the developing countries (Dong,

2010). Many of those countries are especially vulnerable to climate effects because of poverty, conflicts, lack of gender and social equality, environmental degradation and lack of food.

The impact of climate change is completely gender differentiated. The consequences of climate change affect men and women differently (Rahman, 2013), based on their different roles and responsibilities in their community and their level of access to natural and other resources (Wamukonya & Rukota, 2001). The IPCC report (2007) recognized women as one of the most vulnerable groups from the climate change impacts. Women are responsible for 70 per cent of the world's work, yet they are disproportionately more vulnerable to climate change than men.

Climate change is also the most crucial issue for the growing economy of Bangladesh. It is characterized by high temperatures, heavy rainfall, high humidity, floods, cyclones, droughts, sea level rising, storm surge, water logging, river erosion and salinity intrusion in soil and water (Nishat, 2016). The increasing trend of disasters due to climate change places Bangladesh at the top position among the vulnerable countries in the world (Germanwatch, 2009). The government recognized climate change as a highest priority issue by signing the convention on Climate Change, 1992 and Kyoto Protocol, 2005. A number of initiatives have been taken by the government for adaptation with the consequences of climate change. Nevertheless, the climate change is threatening the livelihoods and existence of around 160 million people in the country (Nishat, 2016).

In Bangladesh, women constitute almost half of the total population (Sarker, 2007). They are more vulnerable than men to climate change due to their poverty, socially constructed roles and responsibilities, and their marginal position in the social system (Islam, 2009; Tanny & Rahman, 2016). Women in this country bear the disproportionate burden of climate change. The

present study represents an attempt to highlight gender differentiated impacts of climate change. It outlines how climate change can impact men and women differently and identifies important ways in which gender roles can strengthen men's and women's capacity to adapt to changing climate-related risks.

## 1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This analytical study is mainly based on extensive review of relevant literature available in different secondary sources such as various research articles, working papers, government documents, newspapers, online publications, websites, and related books. For the analysis, the primary data has comprehensively been used in this study. The primary data was collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews with the affected women on climate change.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Gender Differences in Vulnerability and Adapting to Disasters**

<p>Disparities that increase risks for women in disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Higher levels of poverty</li> <li>● Extensive responsibilities of caring for others</li> <li>● Domestic violence</li> <li>● Traditional women's occupations</li> </ul>	<p>Disparities that increase risks for men in disasters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Occupational segregation</li> <li>● Internalized norms of masculinity</li> <li>● Roles in the family and in the home</li> </ul>
<p>Gender experiences that can increase capacities for managing disaster situations: women</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social networking</li> <li>● Caring abilities</li> <li>● Extensive knowledge of communities</li> <li>● Management of natural and environmental resources</li> <li>● High levels of risk awareness</li> </ul>	<p>Gender experiences that can increase capacities for managing disaster situations: men</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional and work contacts</li> <li>● Technical abilities</li> <li>● Limited childcare responsibilities</li> </ul>

Source: UNDP et al., 2009.

In Bangladesh, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change by comparison with men. Asaduzzaman (2015) observed that 140,000 people died from the flood-related effects of Cyclone *Gorky* in 1991. Within that number, women outnumbered men by approximately 93 per cent (14:1 in ratio). In 2007, during Cyclone *Sidr* and the subsequent floods in Bangladesh, the death rate was reportedly five times higher for women than for men.

Women are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood, because of their responsibility to secure water, food and energy for cooking and heating (Shanta, 2009). Water, sanitation and health challenges put an extra burden on women, adding to the double burden of productive and reproductive labor when there is a disaster and a collapse of livelihood (Patt et al., 2007). Women bear the burden of fetching water for their families and spend significant amounts of time in daily hauling water from distant sources. The water is rarely enough to meet the needs

Climate change is now a reality in many countries and an extremely difficult and complex development challenge as well (Zaman & Islam, 2012). The impacts and consequences of climate changes are not gender neutral and are likely to exacerbate existing gender inequalities (Glazebrook, 2011). Women and men have different needs, priorities and possibilities of mitigating and adapting to climate change impacts (See Table 1). Goh (2012) argued that climate change affects women and men differently in the following impact areas: (i) agricultural production, (ii) food security, (iii) health, (iv) water and energy resources, (v) migration and conflict, and (vi) natural disasters. United Nations (2008) specified few gender characteristics of climate change: (i) women are affected by the effects of climate change due to their social roles, discrimination and poverty; (ii) women are not sufficiently represented in decision making processes, adaptation and mitigation strategies on climate change; and (iii) women must be included in these processes and strategies because of their rights, more vulnerability, and different perspectives and experiences.

of the household and is often contaminated, such that women also pay the heaviest price for poor sanitation. Moreover, damage of sanitation systems creates sufferings for women. Lack of toilet facilities increases physical insecurity for them. Many women refrain from using the toilet during the day and consequently suffer from urinary tract infections. Pregnant women, lactating mothers and differently disabled women suffered the most, as they found it difficult to move before and after the cyclone hit.

Women also experienced physical, sexual and emotional violence increases during and after a disaster. Many women refrain from going to shelters during a disaster. Women face some form of violence in shelters, including mental abuse and physical torture. Women often face additional physical insecurity and loss of dignity while collecting relief during or after a disaster. In many cases, they have to walk long distances through water, their wet clothes clinging to their bodies, to collect relief. During

collection they have to stand in long queues with male strangers.

Women suffer more from post disaster spread of diseases and death rate is much higher among women. Women's resilience to livelihoods was also weak as they depended largely on home-based activities. If climate change also makes more people ill, this will mean extra work for women, who traditionally take care of the children, the sick and the elderly. In some developing countries, women also run a greater risk of falling ill than men, since they have poorer health and less access to health care services. Akand et al. (2016) summarized the risk and vulnerabilities of women in Bangladesh due to climate changes: (i) Decreasing women's food consumption and their suffering from malnutrition; (ii) Salinity and long exposure to water causes skin disease and other illnesses; (iii) Hampering health facilities of pregnant women due to damaged communication system; (iv) Increasing women's work load and stress due to non-availability of food, water and fuel during disasters; (v) Suffering from tension during work outside leaving their children at home; (vi) Stress and vulnerability for women for safety and security due to absence of male members during disaster.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women in Bangladesh are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men. Their livelihoods are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, they face socio-economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity. The particular effects of climate change on women will have long-term consequences for gender equality. Being the primary victim of climate change impacts, women can play a central role in adaptation and mitigation to climate change by optimizing energy efficiency, using low-footprint energy sources and techniques, and influencing a household's and community's consumption patterns. The following is some of the possible measures that Bangladesh should take to reduce the impacts of climate change on women: (i) Climate change adaptation and mitigation policies must address the gender issues. (ii) Bring women's voices into the climate change arena. Their participation in climate change decisions should be assured. (iii) Incorporate gender issues in climate change policies and actions from a 'human rights' point of view. (iv) The role of women's groups and networks in climate change initiatives should be strengthened. (v) Set standards and criteria for climate change mitigation and adaptation that incorporate gender equality and equity principles. (vi) Build capacity for global, regional, and local levels to design and implement gender-responsive climate change policies, strategies, and programs. (vii) Awareness programmes on climate change impacts on women health would build the community's resilience.

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