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Pakistan

Pakistani women are worst hit by climate change

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Pakistan is among the countries which will be hit hardest in near future by effects of climate change even though it contributes only a fraction to global warming. The country is witnessing severe pressures on natural resources and environment. This warning has recently come from the mouth of Pakistan's prime minister in a recent statement.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/pakflooder34.jpg>]

The PM has alarmed the countrymen by disclosing that Pakistan is the 12th most vulnerable country in the world, to environmental degradation, would cost five per cent of the GDP every year.

Very few Pakistanis took such warnings serious. There is no media uproar, no popular movement and no political clamoring over the issue. Sad! The majority of the Pakistani policy makers have no time to think about the horrifying picture of the future, caused by the worsening climatic conditions. The country is busy fighting US-led war on terrorism and now almost trapped in a complex political quagmire where it has found itself fighting a war with itself. Therefore, very little time planners find to apprise the people of Pakistan on the repercussions of adverse climatic effects.

The climate experts in the country are hinting at severe water scarcity saying that water supply, already a serious concern in many parts of the country, will decline dramatically, affecting food production. Export industries such as, agriculture, textile products and fisheries will also be affected, while coastal areas risk being inundated, flooding the homes of millions of people living in low-lying areas.

Pakistan's north eastern parts already experienced droughts in 1999 and 2000 are one such example that caused sharp declines in water tables and dried up wetlands, severely degrading ecosystems. Although Pakistan contributes least to global warming-one 35th of the world's average of carbon dioxide emissions-temperatures in the country's coastal areas have risen since the early 1900s from 0.6 to 1 degree centigrade. Precipitation has decreased 10 to 15 per cent in the coastal belt and hyper arid plains over the last 40 years while there is an increase in summer and winter rains in northern Pakistan.

Although Pakistan produces minimal chlorofluorocarbons and a little sulphur dioxide emissions, thus making a negligible contribution to ozone depletion and acid rain, it will suffer disproportionately from climate change and other global environmental problems. Health of millions would also be affected with diarrhoeal diseases associated with floods and drought becoming more prevalent. Intensifying rural poverty is likely to increase internal migration as well as migration to other countries. Given the enormity of the impact, adaptation and mitigation measures are critically important.

Pakistan's eco system has suffered greatly due to climatic change; one such example is that of Ketu Bandar; one of the richest port in the region of the coastal belt of Pakistan that lost privileges of being at some point in time. The former port facilities bordered both shores of the Indus River delta but have become submerged as a result of coastal erosion, leaving only a thin, 2km long isthmus by way of a land bridge to the mainland

There was a time when it was known to be an area thriving on mangroves ecosystem, rich with agriculture and boasting a busy seaport. Now the landscape is barren and thatched houses dotted on mudflats. Water logging and salinity is its major problem and the intruding sea has almost eaten up the villages. Thousands of peasant families and fisher folk community already had to migrate to other areas in search of livelihood.

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So grave is the situation now in the same region that cyclones often visit the coastline and their intensity has increased many times more. Poor peasant and fisher folk communities always hit hard by these cyclones. The blame relies on the fact that the community residing in Keti Bandar is threatened with global climatic change. The coastal area is said to be most vulnerable to climate change with rising sea surface temperatures and atmospheric water vapor causing an increase in cyclone intensity and rainfall.

When it comes to climate change population does matter, particularly for countries like Pakistan with an annual growth rate of 2.69 percent, will be the sixth most populous country. As poor families struggle to survive, environmental degradation is going to be more pervasive. Long-term sustainable development goals are disregarded in favor of immediate subsistence needs, leaving vulnerable communities specially women at the mercy of climate. Increased use of wood for fuel, abusive use of land and water resources, in the form of overgrazing, over fishing, depletion of fresh water and desertification- are common in rural areas of Pakistan.

There seems to be no stopping the runaway population growth here in Pakistan because birth control is often portrayed as anti-people. The country's political and religious leaders who could make a difference are to blame. They have ignored the explosive population growth completely. Birth control is a taboo topic in Pakistan. In our culture, the larger the number of children, the stronger the family feels. Poverty does not seem to matter. The mullahs (clerics) may not like it.

The rural population has been kept illiterate in Pakistan. "Instead of building schools we built armies. The feudal landowners saw to it that the rural population is kept away from schooling. Mullahs declare girls' education to be un-Islamic. The reality is that even where women want to practice birth spacing they face difficulty in accessing the family planning services. They meet with a non-supportive environment at home, and encounter misconceptions and misinformation about the use of family planning.

At regional level, according to experts, by 2050, the Indian subcontinent will have to support 350 million Pakistanis; 1.65 billion Indians; 40 million Nepalese; 300 million Bangladeshis and 30 million Sri Lankans. The total will be about 2.4 billion people. This was the total population of the whole earth around 1950. The strain on resources in the region will be tremendous, and consequences catastrophic. By then the glaciers in the Himalayas will be gone, the monsoons will be erratic, sometimes too much or too little rain; new uncontrollable diseases will have emerged. It will come overnight. We will wake up, and find that all we had yesterday (food, water, electricity) are gone.

This horrific picture is, no doubt, a matter of concern for the entire population living in this part of world, but matter of urgency for the marginalized sections especially women who will obviously be worst and first hit of the climate bomb. Need of the hour is to highlight the gravity of the issue with focus on demanding security to the rights of the poor and marginalized sections in the future policy planning with regard to Climate Change .

In developing countries like Pakistan, women are already suffering disproportionately; as a consequence of climate change. Local environmentalists estimate that 70 per cent of the poor, who are far more vulnerable to environmental damage, are women. Therefore, women are more likely to be the unseen victims of resource wars and violence as a result of climate change. We witnessed this phenomenon in years 1999 and 2000 when thousands of poor families had to flee from drought-hit areas of Balochistan, the most backward province of Pakistan. Women and children were seen the most suffered sections.

Like other poor countries, climate change is harder on women in Pakistan as well, where mothers have to stay in areas hit by drought, deforestation or crop failure. Many destructive activities against the environment disproportionately affect them, because most women in Pakistan are dependent on primary natural resources: land, forests, and waters. In case of droughts they are immediately affected, and usually women and children can't run away. Men can trek and go looking for greener pastures in other areas and sometimes in other countries ... but for

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women, they're usually left on site to face the consequences. When there is deforestation, when there is drought, when there is crop failure, it is the women and children who are the most adversely affected.

While women are the main providers of food in Pakistan, they face barriers to the ownership and access to land. 67 percent of women are engaged in agriculture related activities but only 1 per cent own land. When hit by the negative impact of climate change, women lose at the same time their livelihood means and their capacity to cope after a disaster. As a result of climate change, domestic chores such as collecting water and firewood become more burdensome and time consuming. As girls commonly assist their mothers in performing these tasks, there is less time left for school or any other economic activity.

The recent data shows that due to climate change major crops yield in Pakistan has declined by 30% (Lead, 2008). Experts are of the opinion that Climate Change is enhancing the susceptibility of agriculture zones to floods, drought and storms. It is pertinent to mention that the agriculture is the single largest sector in Pakistan's economy, contributing 21 per cent to the GDP and employing 43 per cent of the workforce (Lead, 2008) of which female are in majority.

There is a common perception that "it is men who are the farmers". Contrary to this perception, women in Pakistan produce 60-80 percent of food consumed in the house (IUCN, 2007). In Pakistan, especially in the mountainous regions, men out-migrate for livelihood opportunities (from 50% to 63% of the households) (WB, 2005) and it is the women who looks after the family's agriculture piece of land along with many other responsibilities. It is interesting to note how much work female household members contribute outside their homes, but their work is generally less visible and attracts less public recognition.

The rise in temperature is going to affect the farming communities in Pakistan as a whole, but will have severe impacts on individuals/households specially women, who are socially, politically and economically more vulnerable.

Important to mention here is that Pakistan was one of the first countries to ratify the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1994 and has also endorsed other related protocols (Kyoto and Montreal) but its Climate Change policy is still in the making. Experts are of the opinion that not much in terms of gender should be expected from the forthcoming national policy on Climate change, as responsive policies can only result when they come out of forums that have equal gender representation along with the necessary sensitivity.

National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is a new mechanism of the Government of Pakistan (GOP) which is trying to address the disaster vulnerabilities of the communities living in hazardous regions by keeping the gender sensitivities in mind. Since NDMA is a new mechanism not much can be said about its programs at this point, but if women are not involved in developing and monitoring important policies and legislations, gender issues will go unnoticed.

In nutshell climate change could hamper the achievement of many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including those on poverty eradication, child mortality, malaria, and other diseases, and environmental sustainability. Much of this damage would come in the form of severe economic shocks. In addition, the impacts of climate change will exacerbate existing social and environmental problems and lead to migration within and across national borders of Pakistan.