


CLIMATE CHANGE, GENDER AND GREEN SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

Climate change, recognized by the United Nations as a critical challenge of the 21st century, disproportionately impacts poor and marginalized communities, particularly women. These women, often responsible for managing households and supporting their families, face heightened vulnerability due to systemic gender inequalities, such as limited access to land and resources. Despite their critical roles in resource collection, energy provision, and climate adaptation, women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, reinforcing their position as a "secondary gender." This exclusion extends to climate policy discussions, where gender inequities hinder women's participation and recognition. This study examines the intersection of gender issues and climate change, focusing on societal barriers that restrict women's engagement and exploring strategies to enhance climate resilience. Drawing on secondary sources, including existing literature and fieldwork, the research analyzes women's roles in climate response, adaptation, and mitigation. The results reveal significant gender disparities in climate-related decision-making and highlight the essential contributions women make to resource management and sustainability efforts. The findings underscore the necessity of integrating gender-sensitive perspectives into climate policies to address these disparities effectively. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the critical need to acknowledge and support women as central actors in climate action, which is fundamental to improving the overall quality and effectiveness of climate change responses.

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INTRODUCTION

During climate induced calamities, the responsibility to provide for food, water and fuel as usual fall on women. They have to travel to faraway places to collect the essentials. Livelihoods are affected during calamities and the male members migrate to other areas or cities to look out for employment opportunities. Whereas, women are obliged to stay back and look after the children and household. Climate Action's Report on climate change and women found out that owing to climate induced displacement, women spend additional 10-12 hours on regular chores (Choudhuri, 2022). Climate change and calamities escalate the already existing burden on women and exacerbates the vulnerabilities in terms of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, domestic violence, forced and child marriage, human trafficking and much more. Even in the relief camps/shelters, women are subjected to sexual violence, trafficking and labour exploitation.

A feminist human-rights defender, Matcha Phorn-In has rightly said, "If you are invisible in everyday life, your needs will not be thought of, let alone addressed, in a crisis situation" (Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected, 2022). This statement stands true in every society including ours in India. The climate change and issues arising out of it call out to a holistic approach from the policy makers and social work professionals. It is high time to formulate and incorporate gender-sensitive and adaptive climate change mitigative responses. Social work professionals work on macro, mezzo and micro level with grassroot level organizations and common masses in various terrains. Green social work, as invented by Dominelli, intends to expand the arena of environmental discourses and incorporate social work practice and interventions into it (Dominelli, 2012a). The prime objectives behind this paper therefore are to understand climate change and the gender dimension attached to it, and analysing the available literature to understand the role of social work in empowering the vulnerable women impacted due to climate change and its consequences. The focus shall be on the means to enhance social worker's role in mitigating gender related issues and carving sustainable actions with community participation in this scenario. Equality, Social Justice and empowering marginalized sections of the society forms the core

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of social work profession and expanding social work's room shall do justice to the profession positively. The paper highlights the multifaceted challenges women face during climate-induced displacement and underscores the critical role of social workers in fostering women's leadership, equitable participation, and gender-sensitive climate strategies.

This paper is divided into several sections that explore the intersection of climate change, gender, and green social work. The first section examines the paradigm of climate change, highlighting the specific challenges and vulnerabilities faced by women and their compounding effects. The second section delves into the concept of green social work and its relevance in addressing gendered impacts of climate change. The final section emphasizes the crucial role of social workers in ensuring women's active participation in grassroots climate dialogues, utilizing tools like focus group discussions to capture their lived experiences, inform gender-sensitive policies, and advocate for integrative and inclusive relief measures that address women's specific needs during climate crises.

DISCUSSIONS

Climate Change and Gender

In today's time, owing to excessive development and modernization, the climate is bearing the brunt of its ramifications. The effects arising out of climate change is presenting danger to several communities. India being a vast country, having various ecological zones and climatic conditions, makes it highly vulnerable to the repercussions associated with climate change. In South Asia, approximately 800 million people will be badly hit by 2050 (Fallesen, Khan, Tehsin, & Atishay, 2019). The rising sea water, floods, droughts, deforestation etc. threatens the coastal areas, plains and the mountainous regions of India. The impacts get worsen by the rampant global inequalities and gender disparities, which lead to excruciatingly disproportionate consequences of climate change on women. Recurring cyclones, droughts, floods etc. is pushing people to migrate to urban areas in search of employment. Given the typology of society in India, oriented to patriarchy, the men folk usually travel to different places and the women of the families stay back to cater to the household duties and child care. The vulnerabilities to women are much higher than men as they are multifariously marginalized, along with it, for the fulfilment of gender roles, the dependency of women on natural resources such as forests, common property resources, water bodies, farms etc. is higher for their livelihood opportunities. Climate change and the resulting impacts act as impediments in carrying out daily duties of procuring water, collecting fuelwood, arranging food etc.

The prevailing inequalities, as mentioned earlier, restrict women from participating in decision making, confines them within the four walls of their houses and thrusts unequal or even restrained access to resources, making their lives even tougher and exclusionary. Inequality in access to resources between men and women is rampant especially on account of the ownership and production technology disparities in the rural areas. Women are paid unequally for the same amount of work as done by men, both in urban and rural spheres. For the same reason, women in India face discrimination in labour market, which is clear from the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, with India standing poorly at a position of 135 out of 146 countries. Women in our society work harder, yet, are overlooked as a consequence of deepened patriarchy, uneven access to education, inequality in terms of employment, lack of women centred policies and exiguous implementation of the available ones, gender bias, higher responsibilities on women in rural areas such as fetching water and arranging fuel, gender based violence and much more. Despite the fact that women work more with the natural environment, their hard work and commitment is overlooked for reasons discussed above. There is a need to acknowledge the role of women in conserving nature as it is a crucial part of their livelihood and their understanding about the same is evidence and experience based. Therefore, the inclusion and participation of women in policy formation concerning climate change and mitigative strategies is must to promote constructive and productive implementation.

The climate induced migration is pellucid in various parts of our country, especially apparent in the coastal areas. Lately, Sunderbans, a UNESCO world heritage site is being susceptible to massive human migration for the reasons associated with climate change such as soil erosion, rise in sea level, incessant floods, paucity of potable drinking water and risked agricultural activities because of increased salinity, and huge storms. The flight to urban areas for the sake of employment could be forecasted to be increasing, for the prime bread earning occupations such as fishing, tourism and agriculture is at stake due to drastic climate changes (Kugelman, 2020). The issue of climate crisis, displacement and migration are highly inter-twined, and therefore presents severe challenges especially to women during climate induced displacement. The difficulties faced by the women impacted due to climate change and resulting displacement is similar to the women displaced due to other causes. The women are posed with safety and security issues, discrimination, sexual exploitation, trafficking and similar grave issues in the relief or shelter camps. The women usually face discrimination and delay in accessing basic needs such as food, water, health care, clothes and shelter. It also exacerbates compromised menstrual and personal hygiene for women, which even in normal scenarios is considered as secondary for women belonging to backward, tribal and poor communities. The climate change, displacement and migration breaks their social ties, escalates their dependency on the male members, increases their burden of sustaining their families and providing for the basic needs of their children and elderly members, resulting in their deteriorated physical health along with compromised state of mental health, both of which are entirely neglected as well. In case of migrating to some other place, it becomes the responsibility of the women to set up the household from scratch, wander to arrange water and fuel, look up for the educational and other requirement of their children and taking care of the entire family in the new location. Women being seen as the secondary gender in the Indian households, are burdened with greater responsibilities with their own personal needs totally ignored. The state of women belonging to marginalized and poor sections of our society is further critical.

As per Debabrat Patra from Action Aid India, during the rehabilitation and assistance drive post cyclone Fani in Odisha in the year 2019, the women were amongst the last group to find a place in the shelters. They were repetitively discriminated against and majority themselves approached the shelters late, as they had the responsibility to gather all the left essentials before leaving their home site (Rahman, 2022). This unsaid and unpaid work concerned with household chores

and child rearing continuously done by the women speaks in itself for the colossal negligence of women's hard work and overburdening attributable to the harsh patriarchy and stringent gender roles in our society. Irrespective of the staunching realities at the grassroot level, the policy discourses negate the gendered dimensions attached to climate change and the its multitude impacts on women because of the inadequate researches and ground data highlighting the same. It is indeed the responsibility of social work professionals to hold and normalise dialogue hovering around gender and climate change, and undertake advocacy initiatives at micro, macro and mezzo level.

Indubitably, the physical environment is connected with human lives and the intersectionality that it holds with power relations, human rights, human welfare, gender equality, unequal distribution of resources and unequitable accessibility is the key to green social work. The inter-relatedness of humans and the environment drives the role of social work profession to be a part of intervention and large scale positive action in terms of environment conversation. Thence, the concept of environmental justice accompanied with sustainability is being included by the social workers in a whole different field of social work known as Green social work. The whole paradigm of environmental conservation is not isolated in itself, instead has larger connotations to it. It shall pave the way to countering inequalities and environmental upgradation simultaneously.

Green Social Work

The domain of social work profession is getting extended into environmental justice and climate change discourses, as the climate change consequences aren't confined to the environment and raptured weather patterns but has greater intersectionality attached to it. The human aspect linked with the entire phenomenon and the associated human rights violations in terms of right to food, health, shelter and much more explains the above. These issues concerning human lives get compounded, owing to the global environmental degradation. Therefore, the concept of Green Social Work is paramount and diligently befitting in these times.

Green Social Work, as put forth by Dominelli, is the practice that aims at protecting the environment and promoting the welfare of humans through collaborating with the ties they have with their physical, socio-cultural and economic environments. Moreover, it intends to integrate the stakeholders and decision-makers who own the majority of the resources, to address the rampant structural inequalities and discrimination (Dominelli, 2012b). The dire need of cautious usage of natural resources in order to ensure their sustainability and availability for the future generations also drove the social work professionals to hold hands with the aspects of eco-social justice and environmental conservation, for the availability and equity in procuring natural resources shall sustain the human kind in general. There is immense potential in the larger activism undertaken by communities, facilitated and educated by the social workers. The legislative changes and policy tailoring is the need of the hour and the immense ground knowledge clubbed with the experience of professional social workers with various vulnerable communities at micro level stands as a productive foundation.

Role of Social Workers in Mitigating Climate Change Issues

The versatility of roles played by professional social workers with different populations explains their key position in deliberating and creating a change. The arena of social work profession is vast, as we get to work on micro, mezzo and macro levels and therefore the right actions with optimum utilization of our skill-set shall facilitate a larger scale impact.

Green social workers need to tackle the diverse disparities in terms of accessibility and availability of resources, unequal distribution of power, structural inequalities and so on. While addressing these issues, the results shall indubitably trickle down to the vulnerable sections of our society that include women, thrusting the necessary social transformation. According to M. Rinkel & M. Powers, certain duties such as supporting individuals to attain their human and environmental rights, facilitating the masses in environmental conservation and eventually achieving environmental justice, facilitate mobilization of common masses with key persons and stakeholders to enhance inclusivity, empowering the marginalised sections to make them efficient part of policy formulation and decision making process; are to be fulfilled by the social work practitioners (Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

As discussed earlier, women hold close ties with the environment, and their work and expertise should be utilised while holding discourses concerning environmental conservation, disaster mitigative strategies, displacement and migration related issues. There is urgent requirement to counter climate induced displacement with a gendered lens by harnessing the ground knowledge and power of women within their communities. A report suggests specific measures to develop a safer, more inclusive and equitable future, which includes all the stakeholders, position holders and relevant actors and organisations to a) ensure women's participation in tackling climate change and displacement prevention policies, b) strongly incorporating local women led initiatives in formulating and augmenting disaster and climate change mitigation finance, especially for adapting gender- transformation, c) stringent direction of specific percentage of humanitarian funds to women based and led organizations working on grassroot levels, d) advocating women rights and approaching the mezzo level organisations to cater to the needs of displaced population due to climate change, especially women (CARE, 2020).

Thorough and methodical research lays the foundation to in-depth understanding of the subject and developing strategical and workable mitigative interventions. Therefore, social work research, especially, gender oriented researches need to be promoted to articulate long term interventions and empowerment of women. The capacity of social work research is huge, as it not only focuses on the recent conditions but also works to provide long-term solutions through its futuristic and pragmatic approach. Along with research and field based work, Advocacy of women rights is imperative in the way to ensure basic requirements such as adequate living, sanitation, healthcare infrastructure, feminine hygiene, resources for menstrual health, food, potable water etc. during climate induced displacement and rehabilitation. A study conducted after the floods in Assam in the year 2012 highlighted the irresponsible and discriminatory conduct of the government wherein the relief kits totally overlooked the sanitary napkins for menstrual needs, resulting in neglected menstrual health by the

women and contracting several fungal infections during that time (Krishnan & Twigg, 2016). It reveals the distressing state of basic women rights of female health and hygiene in our country and the blindness of the government on the same. The streamlined efforts from the social work professionals with various civil society organisations, non-governmental organizations, governmental organizations, stakeholders, policy formulators, journalists, teachers, educators, village level governmental bodies, state owned institutions etc. shall develop better awareness among the key bodies concerning the gendered aspect of climate change and the resulting displacement. This shall gradually pave the way to formulate gendered policies, special grants for organizations working on women rights and female health, constructive change in the mindset of the masses, safe and secure relief camps with adequate facilities for females, employment generation opportunities in rural and disaster prone areas, budget for skill development centres especially for women in their communities itself etc.

The social workers need to ensure higher participation of women in discussions and dialogues around climate change mitigative strategies at the grassroot level. It will motivate the women to put forward their viewpoint and problems as they face during issues arise due to climate change. Tools such as focused group discussion used by social work professionals bring out community realities and collective issues in a comfortable environment. Their experiences will help creating a pragmatic and empirical framework to produce in front of the policy makers and government bodies, eventually leading to a constructive change in the policies related to curbing climate change and response during climate induced displacement. Women's lived experiences of compromised conditions of menstrual health in relief camps shall facilitate formulation of integrative, responsible and gender specific rescue and relief operations in future, ensuring women's safety a female hygiene during emergency contexts.

As displacement and migration results in to financial instability and increased dependency over the male counterparts, again trapping women in the same cycle of subordination, overreliance, and gender based violence and so on. Financial dependency is imperative in the path to empowerment, therefore, efforts need to be made by the social workers on ground to educate women about the employment opportunities available to them as per their skills and link them to various organisations. This shall have far reaching benefits in their lives, making them self-sustainable and promoting equality and equity. In addition to this, the local knowledge of the women could be harnessed in preserving the nature and developing climate resilience, eventually enhancing their self-worth and sense of significance.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research is to explore the intersection of climate change and gender inequality, highlighting the disproportionate burden borne by women during climate-induced calamities. It emphasizes the pressing need for gender-sensitive and adaptive strategies in addressing climate change, particularly through the lens of social work. By analyzing the vulnerabilities faced by women—such as increased domestic responsibilities, exposure to violence, and exploitation in relief settings—this study underscores the critical role of social work in advocating for gender equity and environmental justice. Drawing on Green Social Work principles, the research advocates for empowering women, fostering community participation, and implementing sustainable, inclusive interventions. Ultimately, it aims to expand the scope of social work to address the gendered dimensions of climate change, reinforcing the profession's commitment to equality, social justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities. United Nations Climate Change article says that efforts put in empowerment of women reaps in better and efficacious climate solutions, on account of their traditional knowledge, agricultural land labour, tendency of addressing family needs in times of disasters, and community building (5 Reasons Why Climate Action Needs Women, 2019). It is indubitably the high time to recognise the efforts made by women in their domestic and social fields, thus making their relevance known to the masses. The paper explains how women suffer in myriad ways during climate induced displacement and migration and the role social worker could play in addressing the issues faced by women, and developing climate mitigative strategies with equal participation of women. Women leadership should be inspired, which would follow meaningful participation of women in decision making, tackling exacerbated gender disparities, constructing favourable social policies, environment conservation mandates and much more. As per Women Deliver, a global advocate on gender equality, "Incorporating women mitigating climate change shall certainly make provisions for fulfilment of SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), assurance for clean air, potable drinking water, and ample amount of food and safe shelter for generations to come (Population Council and Women Deliver, 2023). Social work professionals, using their experience and skill set could bring green social work into constructive practice, ultimately countering the issues put forth by climate change and the further more issues faced by women. In addition to this, empowering women by ensuring their participation, promoting equality, advocating, educating, collaborating, and facilitating financial independence will not only help women sustain in tougher times owing to climate crisis, but, shall empower them for life to make their life decisions and sustain their families.

The 'Climate Change-Migration-Gender' nexus in the Indian context, as discussed, tackles the questions on the gender division of resources and climate-induced migration in a broader sense. It brings out the fact that climate changes have affected and further affect the women's rights making their daily lives more complicated. The findings show that the women's participation in the natural resource management and their distinct position during the disaster events are often overlooked in policy processes, which consequently deprives them of the decision-making right and capacity.

The research articulates that, in India, women due to climate change are most impacted, as they work longer hours, are prone to ill health and violence, and have limited access to resources and opportunities. Climate change, this article argues, leads to displacement which in turn leads to erosion of income and reliance upon men, which maintains the cycle of marginalization of women. Women's participation in disaster management activities such as relief, recovery and rehabilitation is often neglected in policies and such biases cause policies developed without proper considerations to her health and hygiene. This paper takes part in the ongoing debates on climate change and its mitigation measures related to climate justice by pointing out the importance of undertaking gender mainstreaming in the environment. It requests to be

accepted the perception of women's attendance in environmental protection works and disaster risk reduction, all being incorporated in policies. The work identifies not only the vulnerabilities of women but emphasizes on their possible engagement when it comes to integrative mechanisms on climate resilience.

The research calls for a reconfiguration of analytical approaches to both climate change and social work so that it incorporates pragmatic, contemporary and rights-driven framework. Healthy management elevates that social work practitioners should rather be on the offense fighting for women and environmental rights, being active in programs and discussions focusing on climate change. Possible practical measures are increasing women's involvement in decisions about climate change, incorporating genders in humanitarian contexts, and training and financial support of women in the community for more responsible and environmentally safe approach.

Although it was an insightful piece, it is only a cursory look at the matter which seems overly focused on India. Digging into the past research also means that some important stories and first-hand accounts are likely being left aside, and uncaptured aspects of "local colour". In future, it will be more instructive to apply an explicitly gendered lens to the impacts of climate change in different cultures and geographies, do empirical fieldwork to capture stories directly from affected women, and evaluate gender-sensitive climate policies, as well as the implications they have for women's livelihoods in the real world. Ultimately, it's high time to recognise the gendered dimensions of climate change, not only because of the severe fairness implications, but also because climate change not only presents new and unique challenges, but also offers a chance for sustaining progress on otherwise (frighteningly) unsustainable development trajectories. These cannot be sustainably pursued without appreciating the vital role of women in these endeavours, and promoting their participation in decision-making platforms – just as in action on the ground.

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