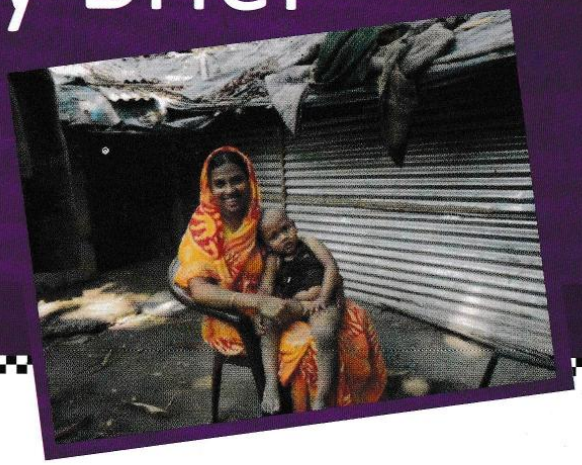
Policy Brief

Climate Change and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: What is the Connection?

June 2015



Methodology

- Review of existing literature on gender and climate change issues
- Survey of rural women from flood-prone, disaster prone and coastal communities
- Key informant interviews with members of the health, water and sanitation and disaster management standing committees at different tiers of local government
- Focus group discussions with the local community
- Key discussions with climate change experts
- Review of national policies and legislation on women, health and climate change



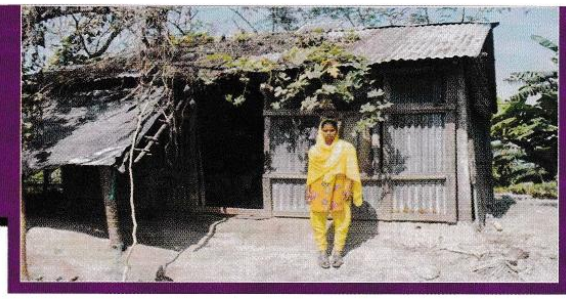
Key Messages

- Gendered Impact of Climate change exists. There is an interlinkage between climate change and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Rural women from coastal communities and flood and disaster prone areas revealed that women are more vulnerable as a result of greater household burdens and responsibilities compared to their male counterparts. As a consequence of high population density, there is a shortage of shelters or transitional/emergency houses. ?
- The design of these shelter homes including the infrastructure, accessibility and environment are not women-friendly. The shelters are overcrowded, lack privacy and perpetuate sexual and gender based harassment and violence. Access to SRH services such as emergency medical care, medical needs, hygiene products, contraception etc. are not available in the shelters.

We need to end the silence and complacency around gender justice issues. This requires formulation and implementation of laws and programmes that enable women in vulnerable communities to make decisions about their lives in the private and public spheres

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Introduction

There is growing evidence that climate change is real and it significantly impacts nature and people across the globe. According to the World Disaster Report 2012, Asia accounted for 63.67% of the disaster deaths and 40.73% of the disasters affected globally between 2002 and 2011.2

Bangladesh has been recognised globally as the most vulnerable to climate change. According to the survey conducted by MapleCroft that looks 42 indicators across 170 countries, Bangladesh is on the top of among 16 countries that are most vulnerable to climate change in the next thirty years.3

The climate change impacts that have been observed include temperature extremes, erratic rainfall, increased number of severe flood, increased frequency of cyclone, salinity intrusion and riverbank and coastal erosion.4

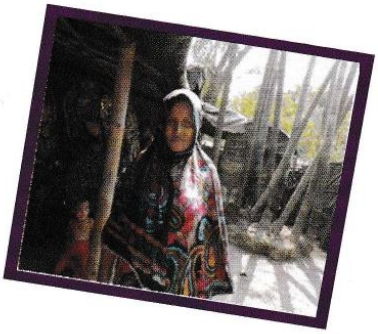
In a society like Bangladesh, women are more susceptible among the vulnerable groups due to gender inequality. Women's and men's roles in the private (households/communities) and public (decision-making) spheres are set in motion by the differential access to social and physical goods and resources.

This means that women take on roles as child-bearers caregivers whereas men are assumed to be the decision-makers and wage earners.5 In flood-prone and disaster-prone areas, during natural hazards and other disasters, critical family planning services are not available for women in need and pregnant women are at risk of death and injury. Due to socio-cultural norms, women are also not taught how to swim which reduces their chance of survival in disasters such as flood.6

Key Areas

1) Infrastructure & Accessibility

In Bangladesh, infrastructure and accessibility play a big role on how women are impacted by climate change. Women suffer more during disasters and are displaced. They are subject to arsenic contaminated water, which can lead to poisoning. The socio-cultural norms limit women's accessibility during times of disaster. Pregnant women are at risk of death and injury during disasters.7



2) Focus on sexual and gender based violence

After a natural disaster, women are more likely to become victims of domestic and sexual violence and may avoid using shelters as a result of fear. Psychological stress is likely to be heightened after disasters, particularly where families are displaced and have to live in emergency or transitional housing. Overcrowding, lack of privacy and the collapse of regular routines and livelihood patterns can contribute to anger, frustration and violence, with children and women most vulnerable.



Emerging Themes

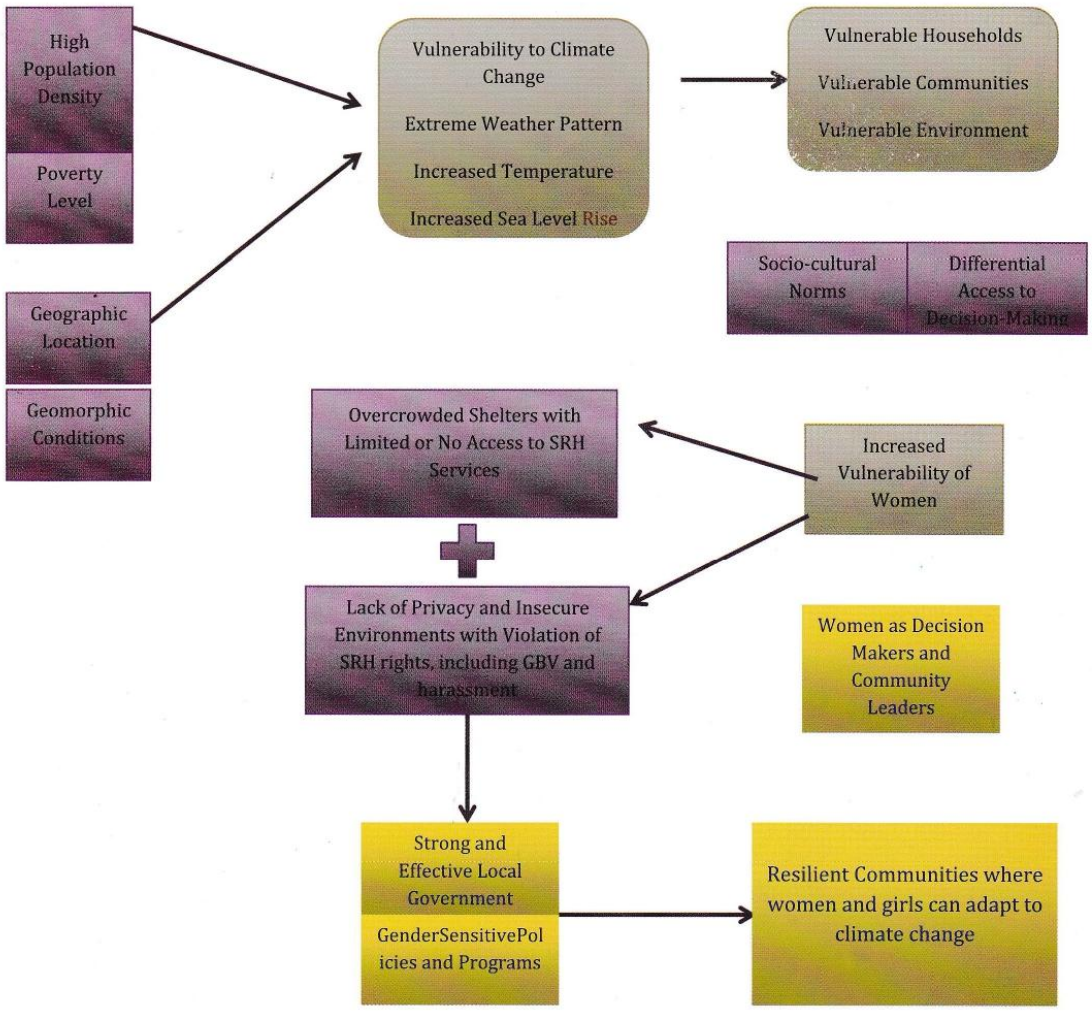
Water & Food Security

Almost all the rural women surveyed highlighted the problems of water and food security in relation to the climate change and SRHR. As mentioned earlier, agriculture is the primary profession of majority of the population in rural communities. These communities and households are negatively impacted by climate change related events such as flooding. Flooding and cyclones have not only become more frequent but they also increased in their intensity levels. As a result of flooding, there is shortage of safe and clean water both for consumption and use. Since the majority of household burdens fall on women, they are more susceptible to illnesses and diseases that may arise from the consumption and use of polluted water. For women of reproductive age as well as pregnant mothers, the exposure to polluted water as well as high salinity water negatively affects their sexual and reproductive health.

Climate change related events such as cyclones and flooding threaten food supplies and production since these destroy the crops. The crops are blown, washed away or submerged in water. For those families dependent on fishing, flooding as well as changes in the high tides and low tides also negatively affects the number of catches per day. Rural women highlighted that malnutrition is a major problem for pregnant mothers and their unborn child, which leads to severe decline in the sexual and reproductive health.

There are also a number of other factors that further limit the access to water and food which in turn negatively affect the women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. With destruction to the infrastructure and the communication systems, there is limited access from the villages to the sub district or district headquarters where the food markets and healthcare centres are located. They are not able to purchase even basic food items such as rice, lentil, eggs etc. They are also not able to get access to medical facilities and services and for women of reproductive age and pregnant mothers, their health needs may be life threatening. Additionally, the loss of household income further limits their ability to acquire food and medical care.

Framework for Understanding the Interlinkages between Climate Change and Women's SRHR



Voices from the Ground

Sumitra Mondol, an interviewee is a 21-year old housewife from Dumuria village of Satkhira district, which is extremely disaster-prone. She said, "When Cyclone Sidr struck, our village had limited access from the sub-district for one whole year, obstructing or making extremely difficult our access to food, water, transport, medical care."



Ismot describes the impact of climate change in the coastal zones

This is Ismot. She is 18 years old and comes from Borobil village in the Moheshkhali sub-district, one of the coastal zones of Bangladesh. The primary profession of the community members is fishing. This is one of the lowest wage earning jobs and as a result of poverty, the girls are subject to child marriage. She says, "I am also subject to this path of life." Her husband is a salt farmer. She explains that the changing weather patterns such as the irregular high tides and low tides have a significant impact on their lives. It affects their communication with the district headquarters affecting access to food, medical care and other emergency services.

Policy Implications

Gender Mainstreaming in Policy and Programmes

In terms of policies and programmes, there needs to be a two-step approach. Firstly, the various policies that have incorporated gender mainstreaming exist in insolation. There is a need to integrate and provide coherence among the various policies. For instance, integrate SRHR into National Women Development Policy that exists in Bangladesh, integrate SRHR in the climate change policies including the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan and integrate SRHR into National Disaster Health Service delivery.

Coherence among Policies on Gender and Climate Change

The government must also ensure that the policies and programmes on women's rights and climate change are coherent and reinforce each other. Secondly, those policies and programmes that have already been formulated need to be implemented through proper allocation of human and financial resources. In this regard, there should be strong coordination among all the ministries and actors at the national level for comprehensible policy and implementation for instance cooperation between the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Deliver on Existing International Commitments

In order to establish the SRHR of women and girls within the context of climate change, it is also important for governments to recognise, implement and deliver on the commitments already made. This includes SRHR commitments made and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This needs strong political will and commitment. Although the issue of child marriage and sexual and reproductive health of women has been introduced to the secondary school curriculum, there is no implementation. Therefore, the Government should organise training, capacity building and awareness raising of school teachers and school authorities.

Ensure Disaggregated Data Collection and Data Management

Government should improve the overall data collection and management system. One idea is to create an extensive gender disaggregated database comprising of information on marginalised and vulnerable communities including data all kind of displacement and migration. This should be in panel data style so that follow up can be carried out. The Government should ensure gender sensitive climate change planning and should organise training and capacity building of local government officials so that these programmes can be operationalised. Specific training should be on how to address gender-based violence in all aspects of disaster risk management.

Important Policies and Legislation

- National Women Development Policy (2011): This was formulated in 2011 after revival of the 1997 Women Development Policy and it seeks to provide women with full control over their right to land, earned property, health, education, training, information, inheritance, credit, technology and opportunity to earn.
- National Health Policy (2011): The committee was formed in 1996 and the National Healthy Policy was finally published in 2011 in an effort to modernize the health sector and ensure the mental, physical and social wellbeing of all individuals.
- National Environment Policy (NEP) 2013:The NEP 2013 is a revision of the 1992 National Environ ment policy in line with the recent understanding and updated patterns of climate change. It high lights the extent and magnitude of environmental degradation including problems of population growth, poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness and healthcare services, limitation of arable land, unplanned development and urbanization, and industrialization.
- National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDM) 2010-2015: This plan was developed as outcomes of national and international commitments of the Government of Bangladesh and the Disaster Man agement and Relief Division for addressing the disaster risks comprehensively in an effort to reduce the vulnerability of the poor to the effects of natural, environmental and human induced hazards to a manageable and acceptable humanitarian level.
- Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan was prepared in 2008, modified and approved by the Government in 2009 with wide consultation withGovernment and non-government sector, community-based organisation, development partners, experts, academia

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Abdul Momen Khan Memorial Foundation

Momenbagh, Dhaka 1217, Bangladesh, Tel: +880 2 9330323, Fax: +880 2 9331589
Email: info@khan-foundation.org, Website: www.khan-foundation.org
Facebook: Khan Foundation, Twitter: @Khan_Foundation