

CLIMATE CHANGE, AGRARIAN STRESS AND GENDER IN THE EASTERN GANGETIC PLAINS: WORKSHOP SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 15TH 09.00-16.30, SUMMIT HOTEL, LALITPUR

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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Vulnerability:

The workshop showed that climatic stress is perceived by farmers as significant, even if they are not familiar with the concept of 'climate change'. There are however a wide range of stresses on agriculture aside from just climate change which are in part driving out-migration of young males across the Eastern Gangetic Plains. These include the poor terms of trade for agriculture, the monetisation of the economy and growing cash demands, and a breakdown of trust and collective action.

Another key point was that vulnerability to these stresses is intricately connected with class relations. For example, it can determine how one is affected by the losses associated with climatic or economic shocks, one's capacity to adapt. It can also shape where one lives, making one more vulnerable to natural disasters. For example, poorer households in Bangladesh often live on land more vulnerable to flooding. Crucially, gendered vulnerability is intricately connected to class, whereby women from poorer households face by far the greatest constraints such as an increased labour burden due to male out-migration, lack of capital or property rights to diversify their livelihoods, particularly if men are not present. Not all gendered patterns of vulnerability however, are directly connected to class. For example, social norms and pressures on women can shape their capacity to adapt to agrarian stress – and this affects women headed households in particular. The videos shown during the workshop in particular show the intense peer pressure from other women to conform to particular gender norms, impeding women from becoming financially independent following the departure of their husbands.

It was clear from the workshop that migration and agrarian stress are intricately connected. Migration both is caused by agrarian stress, yet can also worsen existing stress. Although migrants come from all wealth and caste groups, the effects of migration can be linked to one's economic wealth. Income outside is often not as much as potential migrants expect, and those

with lower paid jobs have less money to send to the household members left behind. The shift from a regular cash income (from local labour) to sporadic remittances, can leave family members highly vulnerable in the case for example of a drought or failed harvest. There are also extreme pressures on the families of poorer migrants to repay the debts they accrued to go overseas, impeding adaptation for those left behind. Migration also increases demand for dowry. The labour burden for women from poorer communities is also highest following male out-migration as they can not afford to bring in outside labourers to help on the farm.

Another challenge is that following male out migration, women have to play a critical role in managing irrigation systems. This affects their sustainability, particularly when gender norms have not evolved to allow equal participation of women in management, while men lose interest in maintaining the systems as their aspirations are outside the community.

It was noted that although there has been a shift to non-farm livelihoods and migration due to agrarian stress this is a survival strategy within the existing socio-economic context, and agriculture is also here to stay. Households cannot subsist on either migrant remittances or agriculture alone, and the two supplement each other. People still depend on farming, but the difference is that it is now largely feminized. In effect, the low wage economy of the Eastern Gangetic Plains, and the centres which receives its migrants, is supported by agriculture back in the villages which sustain families, allowing men to be paid below subsistence wages, while ensuring a continued supply of labour. Accepting that migration is here to stay it is important to look at ways in which migrants' lives can be improved, such as safe migration initiatives.

Adaptation:

The second phase of the workshop was focused on the issue of adaptation to climate change as well as broader patterns of agrarian stress. Women face some of the greatest challenges adapting, as indicated above, particularly those from poorer socio-economic groups or castes. Barriers include: access to citizenship, access to credit and property, access to remittances themselves – which are often cornered by in-laws. Other challenges include a complex bureaucracy to navigate to benefit from government led schemes to facilitate adaptation (such as tube well provision) and the tendency for large (mostly male) farmers to capture the benefits of the schemes which are implemented. At a policy level, what is discussed by government agencies is often not translated into practice, as the example of many of the Bihar state irrigation policies show

A number of lessons were drawn for what may facilitate successful adaptation, particularly for women. These include:

- 1) Need to enhance household level entitlements – in particular, property rights which can for example allow households to bore a tube well with government support, or set up a business.

Access to communal property rights is also important, for example, collectively managed ponds for fisheries in Bihar have been piloted by the Sakhi foundation, with a strong impact on women's empowerment. Cooperation is critical for adaptation.

2) Women's empowerment activities remain important: this include the importance to continually engage with women directly in educational and training initiatives. Due to male out-migration, there is a need to include women in training relating to sectors which are not traditionally the 'female' domain such as the management of large canal systems.

3) The systems around technologies are often as important as the technologies themselves. For example, new technologies which facilitate climate change adaptation will not be effective without forward and backward linkages (e.g. an appropriate market, ability to procure spare parts). This is critical for the sustainability of government and non-government initiatives beyond the project cycle.

4) Mainstreaming gender in irrigation projects is important for climate change adaptation in the context of male out migration. To do so, some initiatives have taken place, such as the effort to include 33% of women in Department of Irrigation project management committees at a village level. However, it can be difficult to implement and ensure active participation. There is a need to give women a sense of ownership over irrigation.

4) Agriculture and irrigation should also be part of the educational curriculum for all. However, low overall education levels for women can result in difficulties mobilizing and training women farmers, although there have been positive case studies, as RSDC's cooperatives in Dhanusha demonstrate, whereby 20% of women have started engaging in saving schemes for the first time.

5) Women's participation in adaptation and livelihood diversification projects will be improved if they feel it actually makes an impact on their lives. The example of community forestry demonstrates this.

6) There is a need to link the basic questions of farmers directly to the implementers and high level policy makers. The media can play an important role in this process.