

The Expected Reversion in the Women Empowerment Outcomes of India due to Climate Change

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Executive Summary

While the world in general and India in particular is trying to put in place a sustainable developmental trajectory, the position of women in this process is unclear. It is an established fact that the positive impacts of development have been unequally shared by men, lately it is being realized that the negative impacts have been born unequally by women. In the 21st century India where social and economic policies are being put in place to hasten and strengthen the process of women empowerment, some fundamental negative externalities are in place neutralizing the impact of such policy changes. The present discussion is an attempt to open-up one such negative externality. The discussion reasons the realization that the climate change is hampering the process of women equity and empowerment in India. It ends by nudging the policy makers to design the timely women empowerment interventions in light of negative environmental externalities.

Key Words

Climate Change; India; Women

Discussion

It was broadly the development of the capitalistic system that disintegrated the joint family and the allied farm system of subsistence life-style. It replaced the small-scale household-based sustenance production and consumption system characterise precisely as rural with the nuclear family and factory settings predominantly located in the urban domain. Given its needs for industrial and factory labour, it took men away from these ruralist settings, leaving behind women to do all the household chores and the subsequent allied unpaid work. Among many other things, it had a direct impact on the position of the women within the household and the society. Keeping the women away from the wage economy limited their life to that of a dependent member of the household. The dependency sprawling over multiple aspects of her life.

Exactly like that of the general developmental process, the gender positioning and outcomes are different from the world across. There is no similarity or convergence of events and outcomes for the broader bifurcation of the two genders. The developmental process world-over has impacted men in one way and women in a totally different manner. Concerning gender equity, a number of movements and revolutions have taken place over the course of the past hundred years. In the present day, the world is a mixed picture of pockets and places with high ratio of empowered women to that of the total number of women and an equally high ratio of un-empowered women to that of the total number of women. Consequently, some nations have advanced in improving the lives and outcomes of women while others have completely left behind.

The woman being born in the developing and underdeveloped pockets of the world are decades away from attaining any degree of sustainable empowerment. Their parameters in terms of education, skill, knowledge and exposure are very low and at times negligible. Most of them can't even think about participating in the wage economy while a very little fraction that can consider such a possibility is not able to find a(ny) job in the wage economy. And a handful of those who do are concentrated predominantly in the informal sector. Within the informal sector itself, it is their close association with land that provides them any sort of employment and the subsequent subsistence.

In light of this realisation, the recent, theoretical and empirical advances in the gender analysis have focused mostly on the relation of the woman in the developing pockets of the world with the land and the environment. The research has been predominantly centred in the developing south and especially in the South Asia.

The axiom that India still lives in its rural areas holds. The population of India has already over-taken China, putting India at number one. It means that the greatest number of rural women in the world reside in India. These women have a very close yet complex relationship with the land and the subsequent environment. The inheritance rules and laws in the Indian culture and established systems predominantly transfer the ownership of the land and the family assets to the male heirs of the family. The Indian women spend most of their lives closer to the land. From playing outdoors to working in their father's, husband's and son's land, they have an exceptionally closer link to the land. Most of the livelihood options available to Indian women are related directly or indirectly with the land. Very few or negligible number of women own land in India, and even fewer have the power to exercise any sort of control over it. The nature of women's work on this land is either menial in its payments or totally unpaid as a family worker or help.

At the same time, most of the Indian women are burdened with the household chores completely. The men of the household from all the age groups hardly take the responsibility of any such chore. This is a culturally established feature of the Indian culture that men working or assisting in the household chores is frowned upon. After working in the fields, an average rural Indian woman works in her kitchen-garden and fetches water from some nearby well or stream. She does the laundry in the outdoors and also gets the food and fodder for the cattle.

At the same time, the modern-day contemporary world is witnessing a dramatic negative transformation in terms of environmental and climate outcomes. The world is experiencing worst and fastest than ever climate change. However, it is an empirically validated and

established fact that most of the causal factors of climate change and environmental degradation emerge from the developed pockets of the world. On the contrary, the burden of the outcomes is unequally born by the under-developed and developing world. Within the under-developed and developing world, the burden again is unequally borne by the women. And the Indian rural women are among the worst sufferers of this delinquency.

In the first place, when land or land quality is lost due to climate change and flooding, the first group of people to experience the lay-off because of the loss of land space to work on, is the women agricultural work-force. The limited scope and chance these women have to participate in the wage economy is lost due to the outcomes of the events set in place by the people living the most attainable life in the global north. On an average, 1,50,000 people are dying each year because of the climate change. 99% of these deaths occur in the developing countries. And amongst these most of the deaths concern women from the developing and underdeveloped pockets of the world. The incidence of poverty caused by climate change is born mostly by these women.

One of the most commonly manifested and noted impact of the climate change on the Indian women can be seen in the form of drinking water shortage. Due to climate change, a dearth of the drinking water has been witnessed. While some decades ago, women could fetch the drinking water from a close-by distance, now they have to walk the extra miles to fetch the same water in harsher climatic conditions than before. This drains their energy and creates issues like; further resource constraints, gender-class tension, violent and civil conflicts, increase in poverty and the incidence of poverty, migration and many other such issues over the short and the long-run time periods.

Quite contrary to these realized facts, the ability to adapt to the climate change depends on a number of factors including; control over resources and land, having access to a regular wage income, easy credit, accessibility to the required resources, sound and good health, multiple welfarist government policies and personal mobility among others. All of these factors are either completely or to a great extent absent from the lives of the Indian women.

In a realm where India is a signatory to the sustainable development goals and at the same time is one of the largest democratic and welfare state of the world, realities of this sort challenge the long-run positioning of the country in-terms of women empowerment and welfare outcomes. While the goal is to converge the gender difference the climate change and environmental effects are playing a negative role in diverging the same. An average Indian woman who is working very hard both inside and outside her household is threatened by a lifelong situation where she might have to continue living in and eventually die in an unempowered state and unentitled life.

Therefore, in a status-quo where the government and policymakers of India are trying to create social and economic proposals and programmes for women empowerment, they need to take a break and think about the environmental and climate positioning of an average Indian woman!