



Understanding Linkages Between Climate Change, Gender Justice and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Introduction

Climate change is evolving as one of the major worldwide threats and posing an enormous challenge to socioeconomic and environmental well-being globally. Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) sixth assessment report stated that humans emitting greenhouse gases have increased the earth's temperature and significantly changed weather and climate attributes.

Climate-induced disasters cause around 65 percent of all disaster-related annual deaths¹ and in 2022 alone, 2% were due to natural disasters². Nepal is ranked 10th among countries most vulnerable to climate change (Global Climate Risk Index-2021), with exposure to multiple natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, landslides and droughts. During extreme weather events, women and girls are the most affected. There is a significant overlap between populations with an increased vulnerability to climate change and those facing socioeconomic, cultural and political barriers to realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights¹. A study by Oxfam in multiple countries highlights that women and children are more vulnerable to violence and abuse, as they are forced to leave their homes³. Likewise, another study shows that scarce resources due to the climate crisis can give rise to transactional sex, where women and girls are forced to trade sex for food, which has been the case in Eastern and Southern Africa⁴.

During menstruation and pregnancy, women face serious health challenges from lack of clean water and sanitation² due to climate-induced disasters like floods, landslides, hailstorms, thunderstorms, etc. Global studies suggest that climate change has significant negative impacts on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). During climate-related disasters, the capacity of health systems to provide SRHR services is hindered. However, limited studies establish the impact of climate change on gender and SRHR in Nepal. Thus, this research is designed to assess climate change trends and scenarios and explore the linkage between climate change, gender, and sexual and reproductive health and rights among women and girls from two river basins.

Methodology

This study adopts mixed methods including quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. It is a retrospective (timeline) and explorative cross-sectional study conducted in two river basins (Khutia and Bandganga).

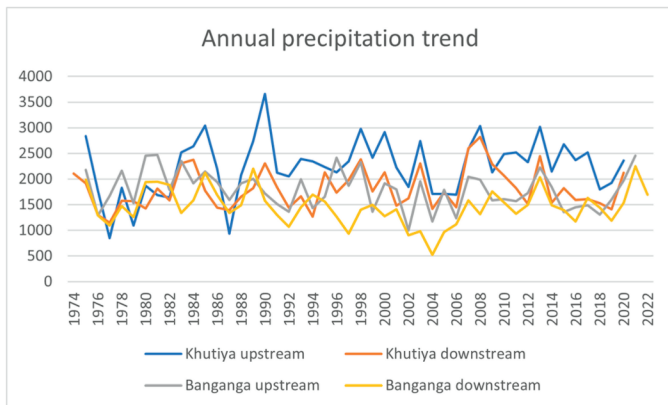
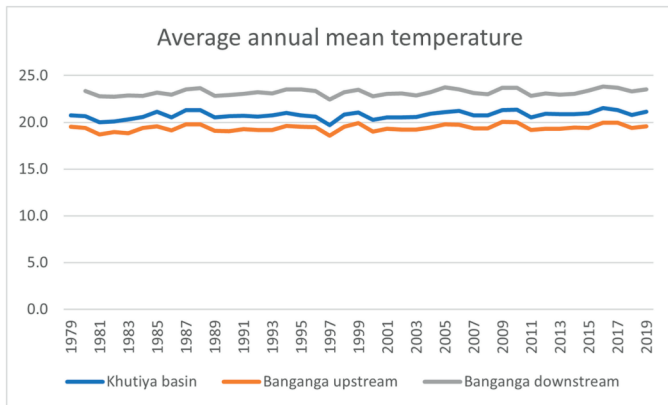
A total of 384 women and girls of 18-49 age group in project areas who are continuous residents for at least five years were selected using systemic random sampling. A total of 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 22 Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted using a purposive sampling method with experiences of adverse climate change impacts (flood, landslide, forest fire, riverbank cutting, etc.). Similarly, six FGDs were also conducted with Women of Reproductive Age (WRA), and six were conducted with women above 50 years of age. In total, 22 KII were conducted with ward chairpersons, female community health volunteers, representatives from community forest user groups and health in-charge.

The study area selected for this study was upstream, midstream and downstream of Khutia and Bandganga river basins in Kailali and Arghakhanchi districts, respectively. Both the river basins fall in Chure's range, the youngest mountain spreading from eastern Illam to West Kanchanpur, covering over 12.78% of the country's land area. Chure's fragile geology makes it prone to landslides, floods and erosion. The temperature data were extracted from ERA5* from 1979 to 2019, whereas precipitation data was obtained from nearest weather stations from 1975-2021. Descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analyses were carried out for quantitative data, while this study adopted a thematic analysis for qualitative data.

*ERA5 is the fifth generation European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecast's atmospheric reanalysis of the global climate covering the period from January 1940 to present

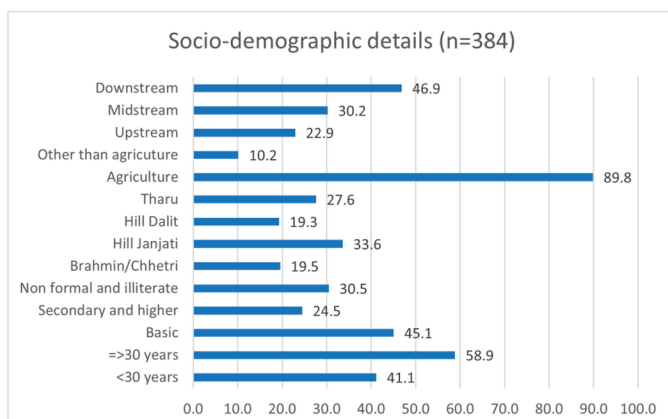
Results and findings

Climate Data Analysis



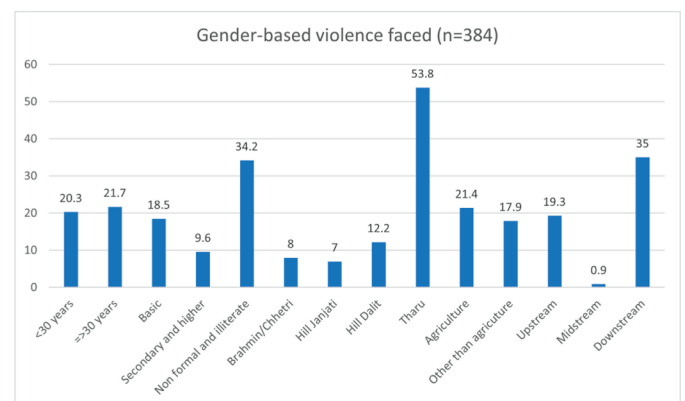
The findings from the temperature graph show that the minimum temperature in all the stations is increasing more comparatively to the average and maximum temperature. The annual precipitation in the Banganga river basin is decreasing, whereas it has been increased in Khutiya river basin. The seasonal precipitation trend shows that precipitation is also decreasing in the monsoon season in both basins. The precipitation trend is positive in both pre-and post-monsoon in both basins; however, the increase rate is below 1.1 mm. The winter rainfall is declining upstream but increasing downstream.

Socio-demographic findings



Half of the respondents are from downstream, whereas less than one-fourth are from upstream, as the downstream areas are plain and populated. Nearly three-fifths of the respondents are in the age group of 30-49 years, and the rest are 18-49 years. Most respondents (90%) do agriculture activities to run their daily lives. One-third of the respondents belong to Hill Janjati, and Tharu is the second largest ethnic group in the survey area. About one-fifth of the respondents have secondary and higher levels of education, whereas most of the girls and women have only basic education (45%).

Climate risk and Gender-Based Violence (GBV)



Facing gender-based violence after climate events was seen differently. Higher age groups, women with non-formal education and those who are illiterate, Tharu girls and women (indigenous women) were facing more violence than their counter parts. Girls and women residing downstream are facing more violence (35%). This study also shows that women who experienced two or more climate disasters were more 3 times (10% vs 31%) more likely to face gender-based violence. The data also shows that participants from the Tharu community (53.8%), participants residing downstream (35%) and participants who were illiterate or had non-formal education (34.2%) all faced GBV.

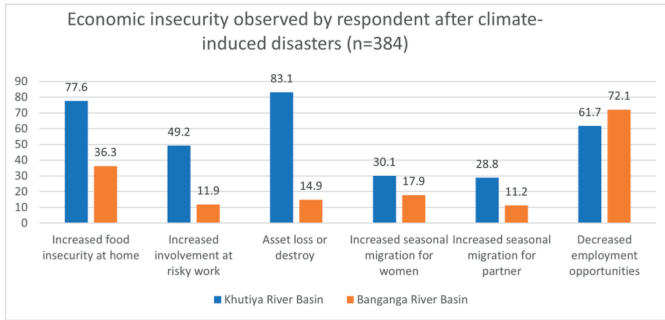
“When the flood erodes away the cultivated land and crops, there is decreased production and financial crisis resulting in conflict at home between us (husband and wife).”

- FGD participant, Khutiya river basin

“Natural disaster compels women and girls to leave their own home and reside somewhere else (Camp or neighbor's home). Some abusers find an opportunity for sexual harassment.”

- FGD participant, Khutiya river basin

Climate risk and economic Insecurity or Crisis

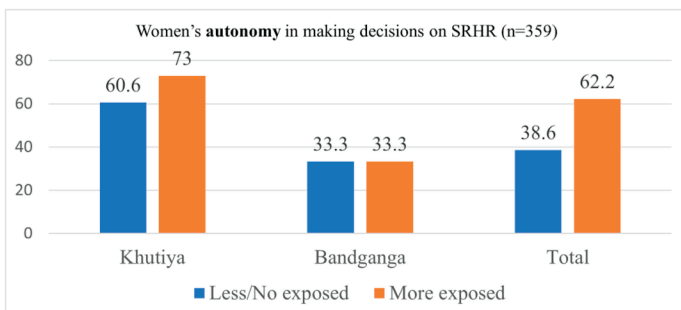


Facing gender-based violence after climate events was seen differently. Higher age groups, women with non-formal education and those who are illiterate, Tharu girls and women (indigenous women) were facing more violence than their counter parts. Girls and women residing downstream are facing more violence (35%). This study also shows that women who experienced two or more climate disasters were more 3 times (10% vs 31%) more likely to face gender-based violence. The data also shows that participants from the Tharu community (53.8%), participants residing downstream (35%) and participants who were illiterate or had non-formal education (34.2%) all faced GBV.

"Our livelihood is mainly dependent upon agriculture and daily wage. During the monsoon season, we are trapped by floods and landslides and stuck. As crops and livestock are swept away by floods, we loose our livelihood making our life difficult."

- FGD participant, Khutiya river basin

Climate risks and women's autonomy



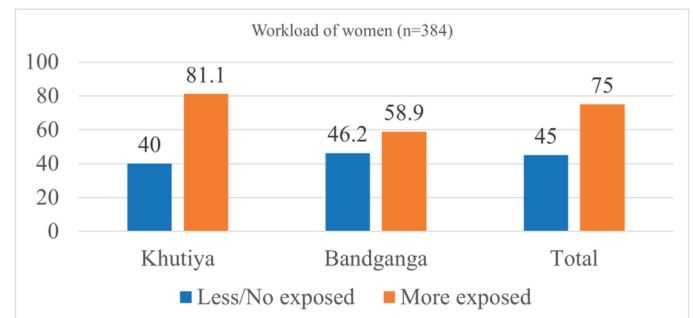
Women's autonomy in making decisions on SRHR (consensual sexual relations, self or joint decision making on contraceptive use and access to sexual and reproductive health services and self SRH care) has increased (from 38.6% to 62.2%) among women exposed to a higher number of climate risks.

Furthermore, women's autonomy is less in Bandganga river basin where women were less exposed compared to Khutiya river basin. The findings from qualitative research reflects that women are burdened with household chores and decision-making roles. This is due to male migration and women having to take decision themselves during crisis. The participants suggested equal distribution of tasks and responsibilities.

Male family members need to be present in the decision-making roles during rescue. Men have more power (decision making), and if men are present during the time of disaster. It would be easier to share the responsibilities and decision make role."

-KII participant, Khutiya river basin

Climate risks and workload for women

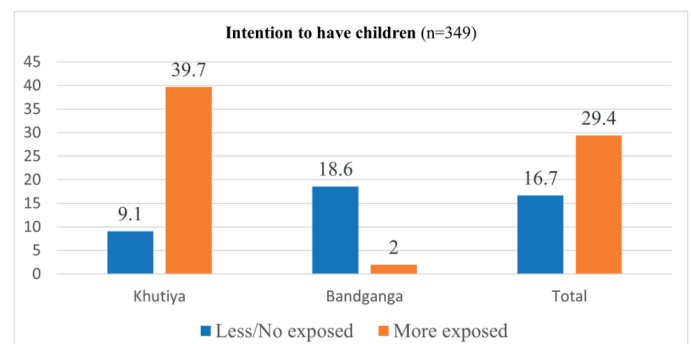


In total, 75% of participants in the study suggested increased workload for women who are exposed to a higher number of climate risks such as floods, landslides and drought. The difference is more in Khutiya, where the rate of exposed girls and women doubles.

"We have to be engaged more in the household chores, looking after children and cattle as usual along with additional tasks like fetching firewood, water and food for cattles after landslide."

-FGD participant, Banganga River Basin

Climate risks and intention to have children



Less than one fifth women in risk areas have intention to have children, however women who are exposed to more climatic risks wanted to have more children for economic reason. The difference is four times in Khutiya river basin whereas result is negative in Bandganga river basin as more women are less exposed to multiple climate events.

"We are in a remote area. If we have more children, they will earn more, loss of a child during the time of disaster can be compensated by other children at home."

-FGD participant, Khutiya river basin

Climate risks and sexual desire

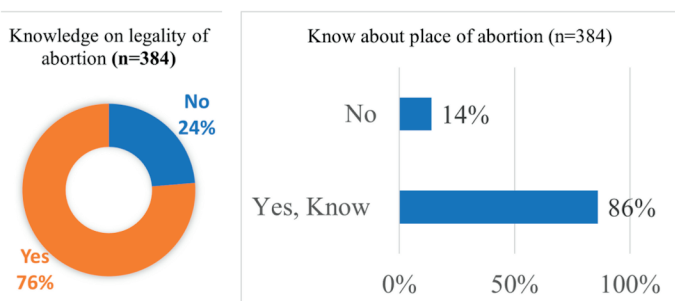


Decrease in sexual desire is found to be common after climatic events. About 52% women and 53% of their husbands/partners have reduction in sexual desire in the study area. While exploring further among more exposed men and women, the sexual desire is further decreased. About three-fourths of women (71%) and their husbands (73%) responded on their decrement in sexual desire.

"During summer days, due to heat, the sexual desire decreases."

-KII participant, Khutiya river basin

Knowledge regarding the legality of abortion



Knowledge regarding legality of abortion services is better in the study areas than national rate. Even in climatic risk areas, more than three fourth women know that abortion is legal in Nepal. About 86% of women are aware about the health facilities providing safe abortion services and which will be helpful to get safe abortion services if she has an unintended pregnancy due to climatic risks.

Conclusion

The meteorological, quantitative and qualitative data shows that there are clear changes in climate parameters in the study area, especially temperature and precipitation. The findings of this study showcase clear linkages of climate change and gender and sexual and reproductive health. The significant linkages observed from this study are increased cases of GBV, economic insecurities, compromised women's autonomy in decision making in SRH services and low sexual desires. The need to sensitize communities including resource dependent and marginalized populations on gender, SRHR and climate change is crucial.

Recommendations

- There is an urgent need to invest in gender equality and SRHR in climate affected areas.
- A pre-informed mechanism is recommended to minimize the loss of life and property in high-climate-risk areas.
- Gender, SRHR and climate change components need to be integrated into national and sub-national policies and mechanisms, by both health and environment stakeholders.
- A large-scale study is necessary to analyze the impact of climate change on gender and SRHR and build a climate resilient health system.

References

- [1] Women Deliver, 2021. The link between Climate Change and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. Retrieved from: <https://womendeliver.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Climate-Change-Report-1.pdf>
- [2] Birch, E. L., Meleis, A., &Wachter, S. (2012). The urban water transition: Why we must address the new reality of urbanization, women, Water, and sanitation in sustainable development. wH2O: The Journal of Gender and Water, 1(1), 1
- [3] Oxfam, 2019. Forced from Home: Climate fueled displacement. Retrieved from: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620914/mb-climate-displacement-cop25-021219-en.pdf>.
- [4] IUCN, 2020. Gender-based violence and environmental linkages: The violence of inequality. Retrieved from: <https://www.iucn.org/news/gender/202001/environmental-degradation-driving-gender-based-violence-iucn-study>



Ipas Partners for
NEPAL Reproductive Justice

- ☎ (+977) 01- 4523101
- ✉ ipasnepal@ipas.org
- 📍 Bhagawati Marga, Ward- 01 Naxal, Kathmandu



Scan to find
Ipas Nepal