



Advance Social Science Archives Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.2 No.4, Oct-Dec, 2024. Page No. 222-229

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE: THE ROLE OF PAKISTANI WOMEN IN SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment and climate change concerns are interconnected and increasingly need to be sought in the context of sustainability issues in Pakistan, where the environmental degradation of the region goes hand-in-hand with the gender inequality. Pakistani women, rural women in particular, are affected most by climate change as they are the ones responsible for agricultural activities, fetching of water, and managing household resources. Such tasks put them at the forefront of climate change effects such as water stress, decreasing agricultural production, and natural calamities. Even though these women play an important role in managing key resources, she is often pushed outside of climate-related decision-making processes, which would enable her to make sufficient contributions to climate adaptation and mitigation processes. The situation is made all the more complex by the fact that Pakistan is an environmentally vulnerable country bearing the brunt of impacts which include heat wave, floods and drought. These environmental stresses pose livelihood threats to millions of people but disparately impact women due to their already poorer baseline socioeconomic conditions. Economic and social stresses and resource scarcity as a climate change adverse impact further aggravates many women because food insecurity, mal-nutrition and being forced to migrate become her reality after an environmental disaster. Real solutions to these situations can only be developed through a comprehensive approach that goes beyond climate resilience towards equipping women to be leaders as they design solutions to the sustainability problems. Providing education, advancing economic prospects, and engaging women in climate leadership will further sustainable development and strengthen resilience to climate change in Pakistan. Women's roles in management of the environment and community efforts are important in research and practice. Furthermore, their participation in climate change action, especially at the grassroots level, can foster more inclusive, just, and durable measures. Alternatively, gender perspectives that enable women to play active roles in sustainability as central actors should be incorporated in climate policies. Women's empowerment is critical and must be addressed in Pakistan's climate change mitigation strategies. The women in this country can be involved in decision-making, education, and leadership opportunities which will create

a more gender equal and a more climate resilient society. Women's empowerment is not only an issue of equity but critical in addressing sustainable development in a climate-vulnerable country.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Climate Change, Sustainability, Pakistan, Gender Equality, Climate Action, Rural Women

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most important questions of current time and affects ecosystems, economies and people's livelihoods worldwide. But its effects are not evenly applied, and women in developing countries, particularly, are staring down the brunt of it (UN Women, 2020). Adverse gender inequality exacerbates such outcomes, since women, particularly in the poor communities, have very little access to resources, rights and decision making process to respond to climate stressors at the local level (Dankelman 2010). The realities of environmental degradation studies have indicated that women are more affected by the phenomenon because of their roles in collecting water, producing food and taking care of their family (FAO, 2017). The gender-climate nexus shows why providing women with means to participate in climate solutions is not only important for gender equity but necessary for effective and sustainable means to build climate resilience.

The country ranks among the most climate vulnerable in the world, and has to tackle recurrent floods, droughts and heating heatwaves (Germanwatch 2021). These climate events affect agriculture, water resources, and public health and put enormous pressure on communities especially in rural areas where women work directly on climate sensitive work such as farming and Resource Gathering (ADB, 2019). For example, rural Pakistani women are important for agricultural productivity and control of critical resources such as water and fuel. However, being so powerless, and without resources they are also very vulnerable to climate impacts (Shahbaz et al., 2019). The combination of climate vulnerability and gender inequality makes for a specific context in which Pakistani women are particularly disadvantaged with respect to discussing environmental challenges while also disproportionately impacted, and critically positioned to contribute to climate resilience.

With a particular focus on rural women that may be on the front lines of climate impacts, the objective of this article is to examine the intersection of women's empowerment and climate resilience in Pakistan. This article examines the role of Pakistani women in various activities related to managing environmental resources and the systemic impediments preventing their active participation in climate adaptation strategies, to call attention to the need for gender responsive policies for climate. By increasing the educational, economic, and female decision-making inclusive opportunities for Pakistani women, we can empower them and in turn strengthen Pakistan as a whole against climate change. A comprehensive approach to both climate adaptation and women's roles as central actors for sustainable development and climate resilience is called for in this article.

The Climate Change-Gender Nexus

In developing countries, climate change significantly increases the daily hassles women must endure, while resource scarcity and socioeconomic vulnerabilities and traditional

gender roles make them more susceptible to difficult and burdensome conditions. Climate change has adverse impacts for women in Pakistan, in the form of water scarcity, food insecurity, and the aggregate pressure on agriculture. Rural Pakistani women are all the more vulnerable to these pressures as a result of prevailing gender roles and lack of resources.

Climate change impacts on water availability, agriculture productivity, and the local food systems put a lot of stress on rural communities. In addition, recurrent droughts and changed rainfall patterns increase water stress in Pakistan where water resources are already threatened (Syed & Hasseeb, 2017). Household food resource management and water collection and management that Pakistani women are often expected to do is collectively and explained next in terms of gendered labour and time and energy constraints, both of which are intensified by water scarcity (UN Women, 2021). But these women suffer even more food insecurity because of climate change which is steadily reducing crop yields and raising food prices (Shirkat Gah, 2019). Such environmental pressures lead them to work longer hours, to physical exhaustion and hinder them from seeking economic or educational opportunities.

Pakistani women also exist in an already vulnerable socioeconomic position where poverty, poor access to health and education, are amplified by climate change. In rural areas where women often live and work in informal, climate sensitive sectors, environmental stresses, including floods and heatwaves, directly impact livelihoods (ADB, 2019). With crop losses or livestock death caused by extreme weather events, women's family incomes decline, and they move to take on proportionally greater labor responsibilities to compensate, which deems women more economically precarious (Syed & Hasseeb, 2017). In addition, the reduced availability of high quality health care and education decreases their resilience to health impacts of climate stresses including malnutrition and raised exposure to disease (Shahbaz et al., 2019). Women's roles in heighten climate sensitive tasks in rural Pakistan are mainly involved in close links to climate and include agriculture and natural resource management. On the other hand, their lives affect crop production, livestock care and fuel and water collection, which are themselves vulnerable to climate impacts (Shirkat Gah, 2019). For instance, while drought impacts crop production or fuel resources become more scarce, women are the very first to suffer its withering (FAO, 2017), as they have to work longer or even farther for the very resources that are needed. However, although it is critically important to them, women are often not part of climate adaptation and resource allocation decisions that determine whether they can effectively mitigate the impacts on their communities and families (UN Women, 2020). Building community level resilience and reducing gender inequalities is only possible if women are empowered to participate in climate adaptation and resource management at the active level. Addressing the interactions between gender and climate change provides Pakistan a more inclusive, just and sustainable path forward to addressing the climate crisis.

Exclusion of Women in Climate Decision-Making

Women's insights, experiences and local understanding of environmental conditions are often neglected when it comes to decision making on climate issues in Pakistan. Rural Pakistani women, however, who play essential roles in agriculture, resource management, and household maintenance, are routinely marginalized in framing the climate adaptation and mitigation policies (Shirkat Gah, 2019). Since this inevitably leads to the exclusion of women from community meetings, government discussions and policy making platforms around environmental management, gender norms work to exclude women from formal leadership positions (UNDP, 2020). But it sidelines those most affected by climate change, and excludes powerful, ground level insights that could provide critical input to comprehensive climate strategies.

This lack of women's voices in determining climate policy has dire consequences for the success and fairness of adaptation and mitigation policy. Where women's experiences and needs are ignored, adaptation measures, for example water scarcity and food security, particularly afflict women because of their household roles, are not addressed (FAO, 2017). Policies may also be missing out on some of those sustainable practices that women, who are primary resource managers, had cultivated over generations, without the input of women. Not only that, but by excluding women, it compounds the inequality as policies continue to privilege those in positions of power by default, men, who have Stone Age-like access to resources and support for building resilience activities (Syed & Haseeb, 2017).

From a technical perspective, not including women diminishes the capacity of climate adaptation measures to achieve their effectiveness, since women's local knowledge can increase agricultural productivity, food security and community resilience. When adaptation strategies do not centre women's role in food, water, and energy management, they miss out on the chance to conceive of solutions that are climate resilient as well as women empowered. These results prompt less responsive policies and practices and can accelerate increased vulnerability and lower sustainability (UN Women, 2021).

It is important to include the perspective of women in climate decision making to ensure that the responses to climate are equitable, effective, holistic processes. Women also have the closest contact with the natural resources, and they have the most hands on knowledge of environmental changes, thus women offers unique opportunities to make the contribution in sustainable practices and resilience building techniques. This can mean their participation helps create solutions to environmental problems and social inequalities at the same time. Such commitment also supports resilience at the community level by building on the daily realities of those who bear the direct impacts of climate change (Dankelman, 2010). It also empowers women to take part in decision making, which in turn helps improve their socioeconomic status to the benefit of the community as a whole through improved education, healthcare and economic stability. Inclusion not only strengthens our climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, but it is a powerful vehicle for gender equality — giving women a seat at the decision making table in matters that affect their lives and the communities

they live in. Integration of women's insights can lead Pakistan towards a more resilient future where climate solutions are just as effective, just as equitable.

Empowering Women for Climate Resilience

It is critical to the process of building climate resilience in Pakistan to empower women. Women are already on the frontlines of managing the basic resources of water, food, and energy and with education, economic opportunities and leadership roles women can be even better and better equipped to be a part of and take advantage from sustainable climate solutions. If Pakistan strengthens its climate resilience efforts with education, economic empowerment and leadership, gender inequality can be tackled. That means it's crucial to educate women on climate change and sustainability so that they are better prepared. Limited educational opportunities for many Pakistani women, particularly in rural areas, hamper their ability to understand environmental challenges, and the skills they need to address them. Climate education giving women knowledge on sustainable practices, conservation methods and adaptation ways to climate such as water saving techniques, crop diversification (UNDP, 2020). Even awareness initiatives concerning rural women can promote community/networkwide resilience by promoting sustainable land use and resource management at the grassroots level. The ripple effect of educating women is huge: not only does it enable women to better cope with environmental changes, it allows them to educate their families and 'their communities', and thus amplifies the sustainability benefits of practices across their communities (UN Women, 2021).

Access to economic resources is key to women efficiently respond to climate challenges. Enabling women to be economically empowered so that they can support themselves and their family means they're less vulnerable to climate related risks such as crop failure or natural disaster. Gender considerations are at play in financing the procurement of climate and other environmentally friendly technologies and support for women's access to skills and employment in these areas in Pakistan (Shirkat Gah, 2019). Pakistan could support gender equity by creating economic channels for women engaged in sustainable agriculture or eco friendly businesses by means of microloans and grants. Moreover, economic empowerment enables women to invest in adaptive technologies – e.g., water conserving irrigation systems or drought resistant seeds – that will secure food, and reduce the adverse effects of climate stressors in production and daily life (Syed & Hasseeb, 2017).

It is essential to encourage women in leadership roles to carry out the work of climate adaptation and policy making to have inclusive, effective solutions. Inclusivity in climate policies means the inclusion of women's perspectives and needs in decision making processes, so women's unique inputs are included in climate policies. By encouraging women leaders at local and national scale, Pakistan can develop solutions at the local level centered on resource sustainability, adaptive resilience, and community asset development. Women in many Pakistani communities are already leading informal environmental initiatives, including water conservation groups and community gardens, but formalising and supporting these roles would not only

enhance the impact and visibility of these roles, they would also help ensure women are receiving reasonable pay for these roles (ADB, 2019).

Likewise, when women are empowered as leaders, their status is enhanced in their community breaking down traditional barriers between gender and contributing to a culture of inclusion in the climate governance. Effective steps to increase women's representation in environmental governance bodies are leadership training, mentorship programs and quotas for women in environmental governance. This is because when women are part of decision making spaces, their representation makes climate responses more grounded in the realities of those at the crosshairs of climate disaster, resulting in solutions that are both socially equitable and sustainable (UN Women, 2020). But building a climate-resilient society isn't just about protecting women; it's about empowering women to strengthen their resilience and encouraging a more resilient society overall. Addressing the gender inequality and environmental challenges of Pakistan, a sustainable future can be achieved at hand while prioritizing women's empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

For effective addressing of climate change in Pakistan a holistic approach considering gender perspectives and supporting women's role in sustainability, and developing long term strategies for women empowerment, is essential. A vision of a gender sensitive resilient inclusive and sustainable future can be developed in Pakistan by working through women's unique need and contributions; active participation; women's empowerment in the climate action plan.

Since women face unique challenges in Pakistan in the contexts of climate change, integrating gender perspectives in climate policy is crucial to that end, and will also capitalize on their unique strengths in terms of environmental management. Women's involvement with activities that are climate sensitive, such as agriculture, water management and gathering resources in rural areas is highly close in current policies usually ignore such realities (Shirkat Gah, 2019). Gender sensitive climate policies should incorporate women's particular needs and concerns, including access to clean water, conducive agricultural resources and climate adaptive technologies. Thus, Pakistan can facilitate climate adaptation and mitigation strategies to be contextualized and account for the concerns of community members across groups (UN Women, 2021).

This can only be achieved if policy makers involve women at all stages of policy formulation as well as implementation. They can do so by requiring gender assessments in climate action planning, to hear and be included in policy frameworks women's voices. It is also essential to promote gender parity in the environmental agencies and decision making bodies' boards. If their experiences and expertise are integrated into policy, it would contribute to more comprehensive solution that are for the environment and communities (UNDP, 2020).

Supporting women participation in sustainability remains a key undertaking by government and NGO initiatives. Environmental management, resource distribution and conservation efforts should be designed so that women are immediately involved

in these programs. For examples, initiatives that provide the training on women in sustainable farming techniques, eco friendly business, water conservation etc. will help them to participate in environmental sustainability (Syed & Hasseeb, 2017). Local communities can also be involved for NGOs, to build women led environmental groups with a sense of ownership and responsibility for their local ecosystems.

On top of that, economic support programs are essential for women who need to have the cash we provide to sustain themselves. Access to microloans, subsidies for sustainable practices, and grants to women owned small businesses in rural is known to improve women's economic resilience and enable them to adopt climate adaptive practices (FAO, 2017). Similarly, NGOs and local governments should start to build networks that connect women in communities, so that women can peer share best practices, innovations, resilience strategies.

Pakistan's climate action plans need to embed women's empowerment as a central component for long term impact. These strategic proposals also include building educational pathways within women that support climate literacy, and technical training on climate adaptation and sustainable resource management. An approach that is long term also includes creating women oriented research programmes to collect data on how climate change uniquely affects women and so policy adjustments over time can be more informed (ADB, 2019).

If women's roles in climate resilience are to become institutionalized in Pakistan, national policies can be adopted that guarantee women's representation at all levels of the climate governance pyramid. Including women on the board of directors, in environmental ministries, advisory bodies and local climate councils would be a way for their voices to appear consistently in climate discussions and planning (UN Women, 2020). Furthermore, partnering with international climate organizations might finance and support these strategies and their gender sensitive approaches become an embedded part of Pakistan's broader climate agenda.

Conclusion

Women empowerment is crucial in building and enhancing climate resilience and sustainable development in Pakistan. Women in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, play a disproportionately central role in agriculture, resource management and family care and, as such, are significantly impacted by climate change, but very little input or decision making is exercised by women on climate related decisions. This exclusion not only restricts the efficiency of climate policies and advances gender inequality, but also forces women's voices to be excluded from environmental policies, undermine their roles in the sustainability, and drive for long term empowerment strategies. Women's close relation to the planet provides the impetus to include them in climate decision making and empower them with education, economic resources, opportunity to lead. If Pakistan implements gender sensitive policies that address women's needs and contributions against climate change, climate changes strategies could be both inclusive and effective. Providing women with the capacity to manage the impacts of climate change can address the specific needs of women, supporting women's access

to sustainable agricultural resources, climate education and economic opportunities, all which lead to building community resilience.

In addition, long term strategies which integrate women's empowerment in national climate action plans ensure sustained, inclusive progress. Things like, women's leadership in environmental governance, climate literacy program etc can help both community adaptation and national resilience by initiating these kinds of initiatives. Finally, the elimination of climate change and gender inequality along the way is a necessary and strategic imperative for sustained development. When we recognize and empower women as important contributors to climate solutions, Pakistan can construct a more robust, equal society that is ready to overcome the perils of a changing climate. Resilient communities are essential to a sustainable future for Pakistan, and that makes it a matter of awareness and action for the women in Pakistan to become, equip, empower themselves and embark on a journey to lead their communities in the most resilient manner.

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