

THE QUESTION OF GENDER EQUALITY FOR WOMEN OF UTTARAKHAND HILLS: SEEKING ANSWERS

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Abstract: Gender is a noun, which means the state of being male or female, while Discrimination, also a noun mean the practice of unfairly treating a person or a group of people differently from other people or group of people. Gender Equality is a state of behavior wherein one is not discriminated on the basis of gender. In common parlance, we identify gender inequality in terms of gender-based discrimination of women in comparison to men in terms of social or property rights. Many a thinkers suggested that equal rights to women may stem from financial equity. participation, ownership and access to property & wealth and decision making without any discrimination between male or female. The UN Report on '*Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*' narrates; financial equality is a precondition to gender equality. But in the context of this country, this can be a simplification of the very complex problem, where the mind set perceived by male-dominated social customs and systems, historically and culturally over generations and centuries, did not enable the society to achieve gender equality under the traditional and conditioned social milieu. The present study delves into the status of women of the hills of Uttarakhand, whether earning of family income and controlling of house-hold chores by the female members of the family with minimal participation of their male counterparts could not guarantee equal status in their society. The question comes, why the discrimination continues, when the woman are at the helm of economic and social activities to run the family of children and the elderly in the absence of their male counterparts, majority of whom have migrated out of the hills seeking better livelihood options. In that process, this paper aims to investigate the role of gender and its interaction with economic, social and cultural factors in determining the adaptive responses to multiple drivers of change in that extremely vulnerable region of this country.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Discrimination, Financial Equity, Vulnerability.

Introduction: Gender equality is 5th. of the seventeen sustainable development goals of United Nations, that exemplify the rights of an individual for equal access to resources and opportunities, regardless of gender – male or female. The rights include economic participation, ownership and access to property & wealth and decision making without any discrimination between male or female. In this context, the present study delves into the status of women of the Garhwal region, whether earning of family income and controlling of house-hold chores by the female members of the family with minimal participation of their male counterparts could guarantee equal status in their family and/or society? In the preface to the UN Women's flagship report '*Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*', it is written ~ "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. Financial equality is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance." In this country, it is observed, is still not getting equal status, opportunities or equity in real terms. The Parliament of the country or the legal system may have provided equal rights on record, the ground realities do not match that perspective. While this study concentrates on this plight of women from Garhwal and Kumaon Hills of Uttarakhand state, the problems are deep-rooted in century-old social and cultural ethos. The scenario in the other states and regions are no dissimilar, but the allegory or manifestation may vary depending on the region's climate, culture, social and educational standard of the family members.

The Garhwal and Kumaon regions have been recognized as particularly affected by climate change (IPCC 2013). In Uttarakhand, climate change results in more intense and longer periods of drought,

decreasing snow events, late monsoons underpinning water resources in springs and streams. These climatic changes act in tandem with other socio-cultural changes in demography, local economies, agricultural practices, that may be of particular concern in the context of increased vulnerability of women. It is very significant that the woman populations in a difficult and inaccessible terrain run their homestead agricultural activities, collect fodder, firewood, potable water, take charge of livestock rearing and all other household chores. They contribute more than 90% of total work involved, while most of the able male-members of the family have migrated to other cities for seeking better livelihood opportunities. The financial empowerment of these female members from these difficult terrains marred by climate-related impacts did not enable them to achieve gender equality under their traditional and conditioned social milieu. They run the family, looking after the elderly and the children left behind in the villages, but are still not socially empowered to exercise equal rights in their family or in the society. This discrimination is deep-rooted in historical, cultural and social perspectives of the region. The voice for these women-folk is still inaudible. By adopting an inter-sectional analysis, it is aimed in this paper to investigate the role of gender and its interaction with economic, social and cultural factors in determining the adaptive responses to climate and other multiple drivers of change in an extremely vulnerable region of this country located in the middle Himalayas of the state of Uttarakhand.

Materials & Methods: In these hill-regions, mostly the woman population runs their homestead agricultural activities. They arrange all other household chores; collection and chopping of firewood, fetching of potable water, livestock rearing. The Report titled '*Most Farmers in India are Women*' published in 1991 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, brings out that while an agricultural bull works for 1064 hours, a man – 1212 hours, a woman in Uttarakhand works for 3485 hours in a year. On an average, village women from this region are now required to travel 4 to 18 km daily for fetching drinking water or fuelwood for the family through hilly-terrain, depending on the seasons and location of their settlements. During years of deficient rain, their travel-time increases further. The land-holding in the hill-terrain is very fragmented and on an average a family holds about 0.68 hectares, divided into several patches of terrace farming, as against the national average of 1.16 ha per farmer. In almost all cases, land titles are held in the name of the male members. Census Report of 2011 reported, the average per capita earning of a woman in Uttarakhand is more than the national average. But the family property is traditionally vested with the absentee male population. The young male members are either migrated to the other cities of the state in search of better livelihood options or opted to join the armed/para-military forces, private security guards, drivers of tourist vehicles etc. Ideally, gender equality implies to a social system where men and women enjoy the same opportunities, rights or obligations, when both are able to share equally in the distribution of wealth and status as a human being. Contrary to this general notion, in these hills, economic participation does not stumble as the main hurdle for manifesting equality of the women population, but other societal forces pose a much bigger challenge for them.

Discussions & Results: The basic tenets of livelihood options and vulnerabilities in this geographically tough terrain are elucidated as under:

(A) Climate Change Impacts and Migration of Male-members: The vulnerabilities of women and men to the impacts of climate change are not even. It is increasingly evident that women are at the center of the climate change challenge, disproportionately affected by climate change impacts, like droughts, floods, and other extreme weather events, but also plays a critical role in combating climate change (UNFCCC, "*Gender and Climate Change*" homepage; UN, 2014a). The Himalayan region of Uttarakhand is recognized as particularly affected by climate change (IPCC, AR5, 2013). In the last 30 years, the regional climate observed more intense and longer periods of dry-spells followed by incessant rainfall episodes, decreasing snow events, late and irregular monsoons precipitation underpin the lack of water resources in springs and streams. These climatic anomalies act in tandem with other socio-cultural changes in demography, agricultural practices, and local economies that may be of particular concern in the context of increased vulnerability of women. In 2012, the Uttarakhand Action Plan for Climate change (UAPCC) recognized the increased feminization of agriculture and consequent vulnerability of women in the context of climate change, especially those small landholders. In the entire western Himalayan villages, the denizens follow livelihood strategies that include a combination

of subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing and natural resource extraction. Studies show that climate change aggravates the tendency of the feminization of agriculture. There are other factors that contribute to the vulnerabilities. The construction of roads for accommodating tourism potential, clear-felling of trees for hotels, resorts and the likes and hydro-electric dams are clanging the biogeochemistry of the soil, affecting moisture level and increasing the dust level in ambient air. The local choice of food-items are being affected due to change in rain and snow, flash floods and cloud-bursts. Earlier, two main cropping systems coexisted - in the lowlands, farmers preferred irrigated rice in kharif season, with wheat and barley in rabi season. In the higher reaches, farmers cultivated dry rice, millets and pulses in the *kharif* season, in rotation with wheat and barley in the *rabi* season. But gradually these multiple crops through polyculture, intercropping and crop rotation are being dispensed with. The local people are switching over to cash-crops demanding less water and that are grown in shorter period.

The sex-wise distribution of workers, according to 2011 census in Uttarakhand, identified 64% of women as cultivators and 8.84% as agricultural labourers. On the contrary, 28.82% of men are identified as cultivators and another 11.23% as agricultural labourers. As the main pillar of Uttarakhand's agrarian economy, women are affected differently, more directly by the various exponents of climate change, warming temperatures, irregular precipitation and snowmelt, cloud bursts and flash floods, changing of biological systems, environmental degradation and deforestation. As the agricultural output has been falling over the years due to climate related anomalies, changing seasons, men are pushed into migration. The male migration from hills to plains is not a new phenomenon and continuing since long, largely driven by search for better paying jobs, pleasant livelihood options. But a significant spurt in outflow is recorded in the last three decades, especially since the massive Uttarkashi and Tehri earthquakes and the unprecedented cloud-burst and landslide episodes of 2013. The female-folks are left to shoulder the entire responsibility for the family members left behind. Going by the Census Report of 2011, of Uttarakhand's 16,793 villages, 1053 in the hills are left with no young male members. In another report published in 'Down to Earth' in December, 2015, about 9% of the hilly regions of the state are virtually uninhabited. This means, villages that have witnessed migration in the recent past, have to deal with several parcels of untended land interspersed with active farmland. Survey of "National Institute for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, (2015)" depicted that 88% of the rural and hilly regions of Garhwal and Kumaon reported at least one male member having migrated to other places. Out of them, more than 51% were between 30-49 years' age. Such migrants mostly remain away from home for long periods of six months to a year at one stretch.

(B) Dwindling Population Growth Rate and Female Child-Birth Rate: Contrary to the usually low literacy rates in the remote villages of the backward states, the state of Uttarakhand has relatively favourable indicators in regard to women's educational and health status. The literacy in Uttarakhand is higher than the national average at 78.8%. Most of the men and women, especially younger women, undergo education. Significantly, the people of this hilly region are emotionally attached to their ancestral state or region. But despite the spread of education amongst women and better health indicators compared to other backward states, there are an alarmingly declining number of female children, which is eluding the attention of demographers and social activists. The hills of Uttarakhand did not have a history or culture of female infanticide earlier, unlike the nearby states of Haryana, Punjab or Rajasthan. There was also no apparent discrimination towards girl child in terms of access to education, distribution of food, medical care or the other child care facilities. The 'Purdah' system was not rigidly practiced either. The state witnessed 'Chipko' movement in the 1970-80s for saving the trees, which was mostly carried forward by the women of the hills. But, of late, selective abortion is on the rise. It was no coincidence that the decline in female child birth started in tune with the exodus of male members to cities and other states. The state now has the lowest sex ratio at birth (SRB) with only 866 girls being born for every 1,000 boys. The reason for such intriguing position is the rampant sex-determination test and female infanticide spread, of late, across villages in the hills. The migrated men-folk, having enlightened with the culture of infanticide in the cities, imported pre-natal sex determination and selective abortions to their ancestral place. Eliciting information on determinants of selective abortion is difficult from female populaces. The exodus of young male population out of the hill districts has also have a link to the negative decadal growth-rate in the major hill districts of Almora

(-1.28%), Pauri Garhwal (-1.41%), Uttarkashi (-1.17%), Chamoli (-1.44%). The hills registered an overall negative compound annual population growth rate of (-) 0.14%. This alarming trend and skewed sex ratio would have serious implications for the future population structure, posing more difficulties to the left over female population. Thus, the challenges to the viability of traditional livelihood methods are undermining local communities' livelihood assets in gender-specific ways where the women have no say in decision making and are always at the receiving end.

(C) Difficulties in Conventional Agriculture, Water and Fodder Collection: Forests and minor forest produces are recognized under Common Property Resources (CPRs) to which the lives of hill women are intricately linked. Livestock management is another activity that the hill women practice for their own subsistence. The availability of fodder and other forest produce becomes a crucial matter for the hill-women. Climate change, deforestation, damming of rivers and streams, spurt in road-construction and tourism industries in the remote Uttarakhand hills are into increasing hardships due to decline in the CPRs. Hill women perceive the impacts of increasing dust-level in the atmosphere due to long dry-spells and construction of roads and dams, variations in the mist and precipitation vis-à-vis forest cover of the region. In the past women never used to feel a dearth in the quantity of fodder, but due to a drop in the level and frequency of rainfall, fodder was scanty and only available in the villages near water source such as spring or river. Going by a report of Kumaon University, about 37% of natural springs that contribute to the Ganga river system are rapidly drying up. About 8% of the first order springs, which do not have any tributary, have dried up at a rate of about 6–7 km/year. Perennial streams have now become seasonal. This has impacted the drinking water availability, water for irrigation and sanitation, leading to a virtual crisis in villages especially in the summer. While 72% women and 14% of children bear the responsibility of carrying potable water, on an average, a woman is required to walk 4–18 km per day to fetch water, fuel or fodder. Changing Climate increases the length and duration of their walking. According to estimates, almost 60% of all water sources have dried up in the hills. All the nine hill districts of the state have been declared drought-hit affecting an approximate 75,000 hectares of farm land. A report of the Central Groundwater Board states, the vegetation cover in the forests which helps in holding and percolating the water, are destroyed in the massive forest fires. The cracks through which water seeps into the ground and replenishes the water sources have been blocked with soot or ash. This is directly affecting water flow in these sources. Lack of snowfall over the years is also compounding the problem of drying out of natural springs, as reported by scientists of Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology.

Women from all the villages perceive that the underground water table has gone down due to water based farming, pollution and tourism, coupled with poor rainfall over the years. They are now aware that poor density of trees has led to low retention of water, increasing surface run-off. The hills are experiencing a steep decline in the agricultural productivity over the past few decades further increasing the hardships of the women. Traditional crops dominated the agricultural land until 1975 but cultivation of cash crops now dominates agricultural land. Presently only 42% of people are cultivating some traditional varieties of crops. In earlier days, farming was major activity in the habitable areas outside the forests, where over 16,000 villages are located. But it was largely subsistence farming that kept the villagers free of dependence on hard cash. Today that farming practice is crippled by repeated flash floods and droughts, increased man-animal conflicts and migration of able-bodied males. This is leading to narrowing of livelihood resource-base and food-security as cash crops replace traditional crops. Here again the women are at the pivot as they are responsible for providing food to the elderly and the children at the homes.

(D) Exploitative Social Customs and Taboo: It was the women who were at the forefront of the famous Chipko (hug the trees) movement in the 1970s to protest against extensive deforestation that threatened to wreck the ecological balance of the region. As the backbone of Uttarakhand's agrarian economy, they are most directly hit by environmental degradation, deforestation and use of forest resources for livelihood. They are at the helm of the family economy and yet are victims of social customs and taboo practiced historically. In the tapestry of such complex realities of the region, the

women-centric intersectional approach may potentially improve our understanding on how gender relationships are crosscut by ethnicity, historically perceived traditions, wealth class and capabilities.

Conclusion: In Garhwali folklores, the area is called the land of minor brides, starting at age as little as 4 years, followed by 'Gouna', the ceremony associated with the consummation of marriage after attaining puberty, when the male and female partners are socially united. Although the women are at the helm of running the family of children & elderly and earn the living for the family, the historical and primitive social customs kept them bound by taboos, like remaining untouchable during the menstrual periods, staying quarantined at the household animals-sheds after child-birth and undergoing purification rituals thereafter. The female population continues to accept such exploitative social customs drawn out of male chauvinism. It is thus a totally fragmented scenario, where the perspectives of gender inequality are to be defined in different scales. The achievement of substantive equality, Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas, though difficult, must address transformation of social and institutional structures, countering stigma and prejudices and extending equal opportunities.

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