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■ THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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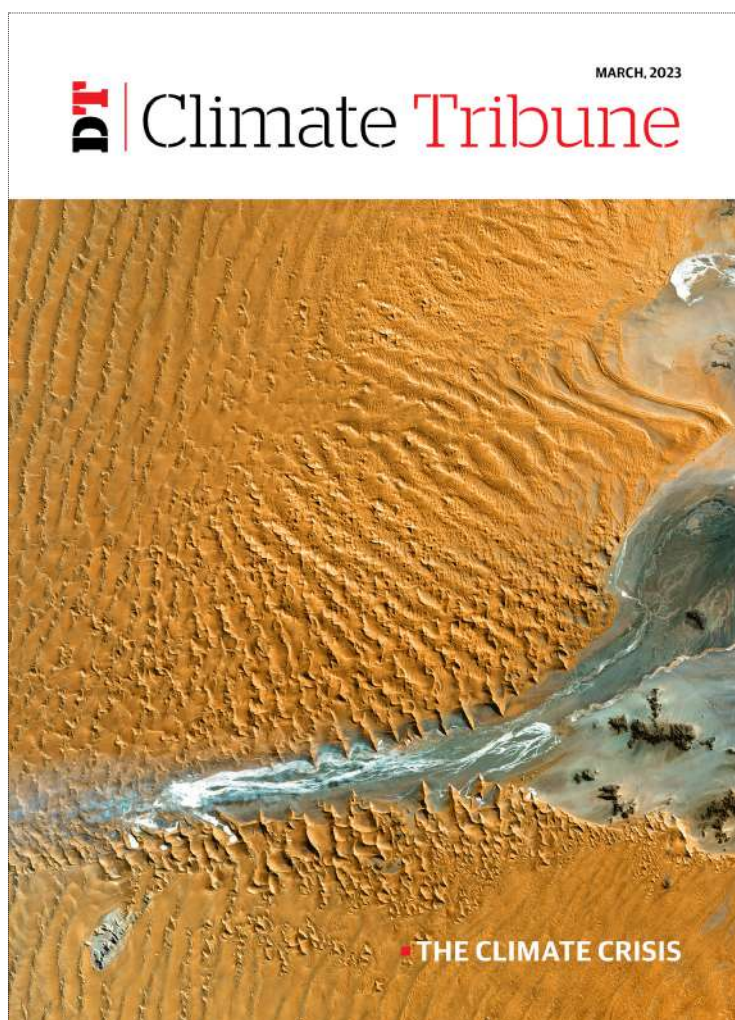
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CONTENTS

CLIMATE JUSTICE	3
GENDER INEQUALITY	6
CHAR COMMUNITIES	9
WOMEN-LED INITIATIVES	11



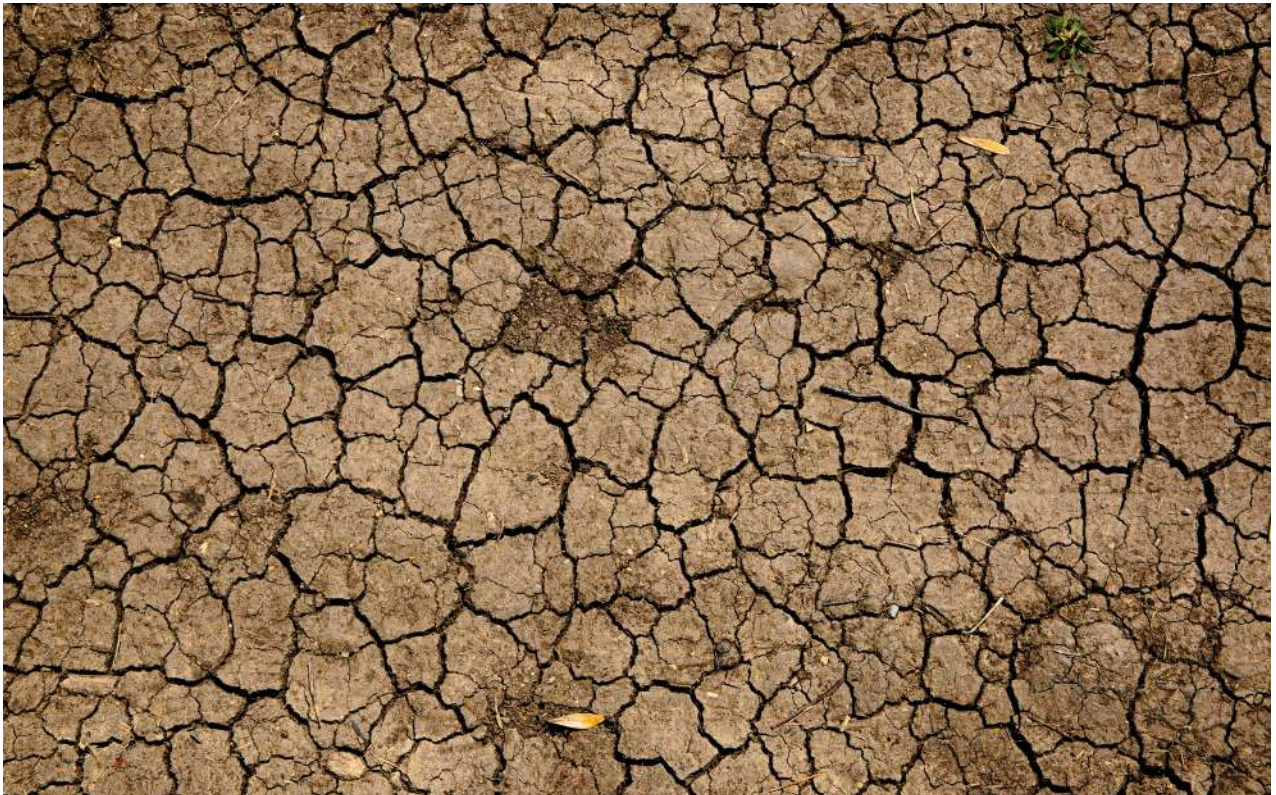


PHOTO:UNSPLASH

Climate justice for women and state obligations under international law

Vanuatu is leading an initiative calling on the International Court of Justice to clarify State Obligations under a range of international laws to protect women, young people and the fundamental human rights of present and future generations

Dr Christopher Bartlett

Science has long provided unequivocal warnings about the consequences of expanding greenhouse gas emissions, and demonstrated that climate change impacts do not affect people equally, but often intensify existing inequalities, vulnerabilities, economic poverty and unequal power relations (IPCC B.2.4), forcing women and girls to unjustly fight at the frontline of the climate emergency.

Sadly, women in the Pacific Island archipelago of Vanuatu

already experience high rates of inequality, further exacerbating catastrophic climate vulnerabilities. Vanuatu has been ranked as one of the world's most climate vulnerable nations in the world. The intersection of these issues are wide-ranging and severe, including serious short-term and long-term impacts on women's physical, mental and reproductive health; and impacts on children's emotional well-being and schooling. There are enormous economic costs to families, communities and the nation to deal with these interrelated threats; yielding lost opportunities for environmental, social and economic development.

“There are low numbers of women represented on community decision-making bodies”

Ni-Vanuatu women’s engagement in governance and leadership is low. At the household level, women typically have limited influence in decision making about expenditure and resource use, and do not often have land ownership. At the community level, traditional governance structures commonly exclude women, while social conventions fail to value women’s contributions. There are low numbers of women represented on community decision-making bodies, making them less likely to receive critical information for preparedness and to be able influence decision making. At the national level, Vanuatu only just elected in 2022 its first female Member of Parliament in more than a decade.

The ravaging effects of global warming have become existential for Vanuatu, and for many peoples across the planet. As economies are ravaged, livelihoods decimated and lives lost, it is clear that the climate crisis is a human rights crisis.

Vanuatu’s women increasingly suffer from the insidious rise in sea levels that eats away at their coastal villages, ocean acidification that is dissolving their reefs, increasing sea surface temperatures bleaching corals and sea grasses, category 5 cyclones which are ripping apart island schools and clinics, landslides that erase entire villages and plantations, and prolonged droughts that shrivel and kill essential subsistence crops before they can be harvested.

But States continue, through their acts and omissions, to cause significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment, especially to women and girls, even when international laws clearly require otherwise.

The Paris Agreement was, many hoped, a way to ensure

accountable, transparent and life-saving actions to reduce the impact of global warming. But unfortunately the pledges, promises and commitments made under this Agreement take us well beyond the safe operating limit of 1.5 Degrees. Even the words of the Paris Agreement itself are largely gender-blind, appearing only three times throughout the whole document. Similarly Human rights is lightly referenced in the preamble. By not explicitly articulating gender or human rights approaches to climate action, many Parties have remained uncommitted to these critical issues during implementation.

Of note, the recent UN Climate COP 27 cover decision suggested that States “should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights”.

But what exactly are our human rights and climate change obligations?

From Vanuatu’s perspective, beyond the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, other instruments under agreed International Law already contain clear obligations to prevent harm to the environment and protect human rights, including but not limited to the Charter of the United Nations and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

But how can the obligations under a wide body of existing treaties begin to be applied to the climate crisis?

The United Nations International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the only principal organ of the UN System that has not yet been given an opportunity to help address the climate crisis.

To get to the court, Vanuatu and dozens of Co Sponsoring nations will soon table a Resolution at the UN General Assembly. If the Resolution is Adopted the ICJ will consider two simple questions:

1. What are the obligations that all States have, under a range of international laws, to protect the climate system the environment from greenhouse gases? and
2. What are the legal consequences when States actually do cause climate related harm to other States or to future generations?

These question should have been asked long ago, and that the answer given by the World’s Highest Court will help Countries get back on track in upholding the rule of international law, and bringing human rights thinking into energy and climate decisions moving forward. Currently more than 90 countries have confirmed they will support the adoption of this UNGA ICJ Climate Resolution.

The Court’s non-binding guidance may inspire countries to revise and enhance their Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement. Vanuatu, after reviewing its obligations across international treaties, released a new NDC in 2022 which includes mitigation, adaptation and loss & damage commitments, including with targets focused on gender and social inclusion, youth, people with disabilities



PHOTO:UNSPLASH

and indigenous people.

In essence, Vanuatu's request to the ICJ bring much-needed clarification of legal obligations already agreed under international law, without creating new rules or obligations. Importantly, legal clarification from the ICJ can focus legal considerations towards the protection of fundamental human rights of present and future generations, a critical shift from the prevailing narratives of tons of carbon and degrees of Celsius.

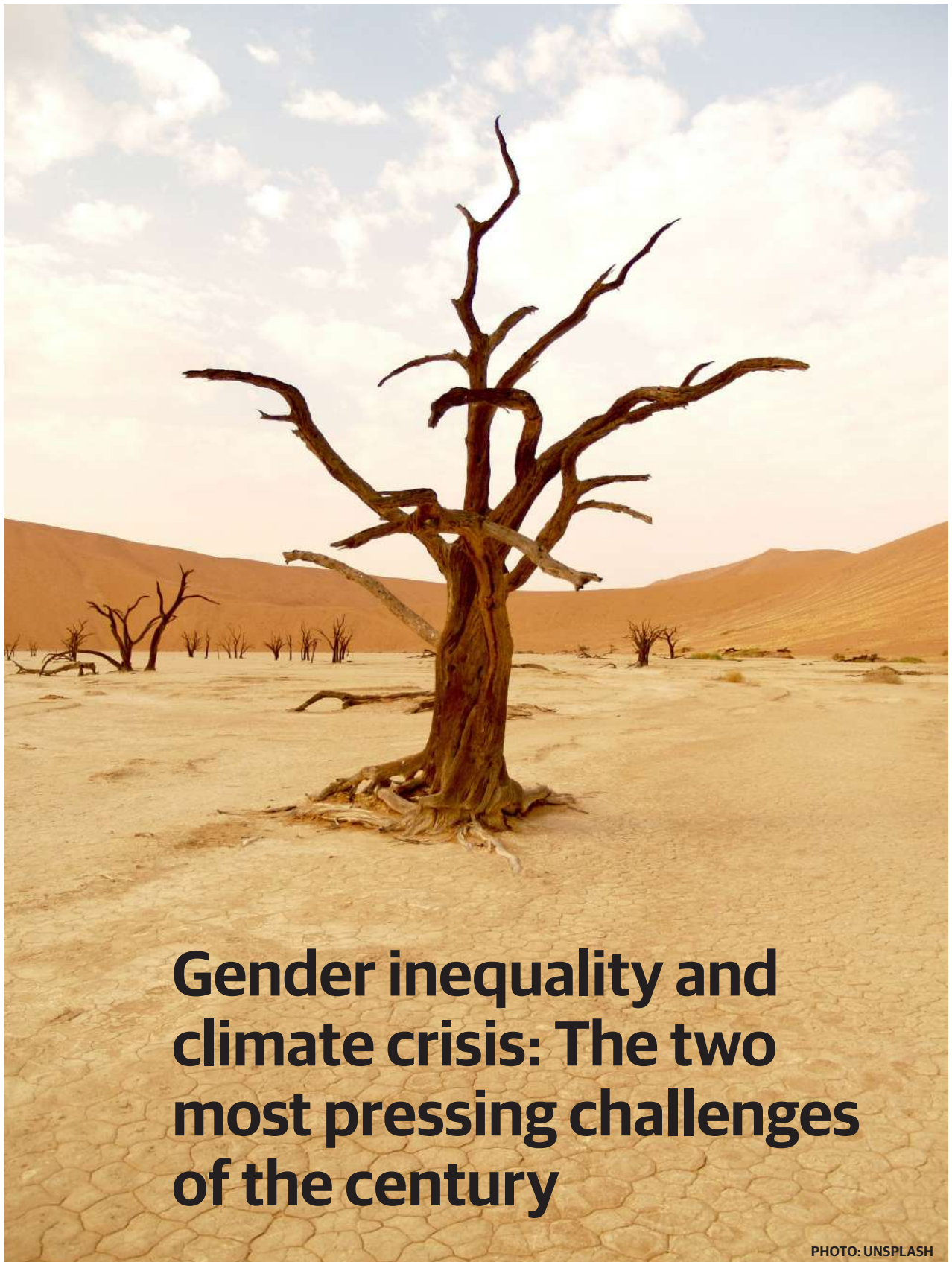
The Advisory Opinion may also identify gaps, which may inspire the development of new legal instruments. Vanuatu is also advocating for the criminalization of Ecocide under the International Criminal Court, and for the development of a new Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty that addresses the production and supply of fossil fuels and means for a just transition.

It is past time for the world to have the legal clarity we all need to do more for our planet, for our people, and for our future generations. From the smallest village to the global stage, the rule of law is all that stands between peace and stability, climate resilience and catastrophe. We are out of time in Vanuatu, and women and girls are demanding States to demonstrate the required leadership.

Read the full UNGA Climate Resolution on www.Vanuatu-ICJ.com. ■

“ It is past time for the world to have the legal clarity we all need to do more for our planet, for our people, and for our future generations ”

Dr Christopher Bartlett has been living and working in the Pacific Islands for over two decades, and is currently heading the Government of Vanuatu's Climate Diplomacy program. His extensive work with communities, civil society, private sector and governments in the Pacific have shaped his current climate action interests around climate adaptation, biodiversity, development finance and loss & damage. Dr Bartlett has written dozens of climate policy documents, managed the implementation of multiple national climate change projects, and is a lead climate negotiator for the Republic of Vanuatu at the United Nations. He can be reached at VanuatuClimateChange@gmail.com



**Gender inequality and
climate crisis: The two
most pressing challenges
of the century**

PHOTO: UNSPLASH

Gitanjali Singh

“I am a mother of four daughters; my husband died in an accident at his workplace, Narshingdi. Due to the riverbank erosion of Dharola river, I lost my house and agricultural land. With support from local families in my community, I was somehow able to build a small house in the ‘char’ which was washed away during the flood in 2022. Riverbank erosion, in addition to the flood in 2022, disrupted my life and livelihood.”- Rabeya Begum, Jagamoner Char, Vogdanga Union, Kurigram Sadar Upazila.

In June 2022, northeastern Bangladesh experienced a severe flash flood affecting an estimated 7.2 million people, 50 per cent of whom are women and girls. Rabeya is just one of the many people severely affected by the flood. Destroyed houses created concerns for women and girl’s safety and security, putting them at heightened risk of gender-based violence; reproductive health care services were disrupted by the unavailability of health workers, midwives, and birth attendants; and many women, who depended on day labour and tending livestock for their livelihoods, lost their income. The flood also caused a reduction in nutritious food intake among women and children, whose health condition were already a serious concern. The severity and disproportionate impact of the flood on people of different genders is one of many stark reminders of the criticality of investing in gender inclusive climate mitigation and adaptation. Bangladesh is the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2021. Floods and riverbank erosion affect about one million people every year, and every three to five years, about two-thirds of the country is flooded. Another major natural hazard in Bangladesh is cyclones.

Ian Fry, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Context of Climate Change, noted the gendered effects of climate change during his mission to Bangladesh in September 2022. He found that women in the South-West coast belt, which is at the forefront of climate change impacts (particularly storm surges and cyclones), were forced to work as manual labour in nearby shrimp and crab farms due to the extensive loss of livestock and personal possessions. His report highlighted that they are compelled to spend up to six (6) hours a day in saline water. This impacts their sexual and reproductive health rights, which is an integral part of the right to health enshrined in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Some choose to take contraceptive injections to reduce blood flow when working in the saline water. The climate crisis is inherently gendered and the adverse climate impacts are reversing hard earned gender equality gains. Women and girls are faced with greater challenges in climate change adaptation, disproportionate economic repercussions, increased unpaid care and domestic work, and heightened

risk of violence due to the climate crisis.

Bangladesh, despite being one of the country’s worst affected by climate change, has in recent years seen remarkable success in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster management, significantly reducing the loss of lives due to disasters. In terms of climate policies, the country has made strong progress in strengthening the normative framework through the National Plan for Disaster Management, Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, and the 100 years Delta Plan, all of which acknowledged the importance of gender inclusive approaches. Now the focus needs to be on translating the policies and strategies into concrete action for positive change in the lives of the most at risk women and girls.

In March 2022, at the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Member States adopted a blueprint for world leaders to promote women and girls’ full and equal participation and leadership in the design and implementation of climate change and DRR policies and programmes. The agreed conclusions recommend 1) integrating gender perspectives into climate, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes; 2) promoting women’s

“ Bangladesh, despite being one of the country’s worst affected by climate change, has in recent years seen remarkable success in disaster risk reduction ”

and girls' full and equal participation and leadership to achieve real change led by women; 3) building resilience of women and girls and their organizations; 4) ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights, by strengthening health systems and strengthening prevention, response and recovery from sexual and gender-based violence; 5) promoting and protect women environmental human rights defenders; 6) increase financing for gender-responsive climate, environmental and disaster risk initiatives; 7) supporting women's organizations, enterprises and cooperatives; and 8) improving and investing in gender specific statistics and data to amplify the relationship between gender and climate. At COP 27 (2022) in Egypt the Gender Day focused on women as powerful change agents and leaders in climate change action. The session highlighted that while women in leadership positions remain a minority, they are crucial to addressing the hardships brought on by the climate crisis and delivering viable solutions.

The UN has been prioritizing Bangladesh's resilience building for more than two decades, from supporting the establishment of the Disaster Management Bureau, which evolved into the Department of Disaster Management, to supporting the country's flagship DRR programme: Comprehensive Disaster Management programme (CDMP). UN Women, UNDP and UNOPS have been jointly assisting the government (Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Programming Division of Planning Commission, and Local Government and Engineering Department, [LGED]) to enhance the resilience of the country by strengthening the DRR system and the capacity of at risk communities, under the National Resilience Programme (NRP). Under NRP, UN Women also supported the government to produce several landmark strategies and tools, such as the Gender Marker Toolkit for Infrastructure to support LGED to design and implement infrastructure projects that benefit men and women equally. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics developed a Guideline and Protocol to collect sex, age and disability disaggregated data of disasters and climatic impacts, a crucial building block for gender mainstreaming in resilience building policies and plans. UN Women together with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) is implementing a regional programme: "EmPower: Women for Climate-Resilient Societies", which is enhancing the voice, choice, and agency of grassroots, women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) to play an instrumental role in responding to the climate crisis at the local level. The initiative is also contributing to creating a conducive policy environment through policy assessments and revising key documents like the Climate Change and Gender Action Plan. The Government of Sweden and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office of the British Government have supported UN Women to advance these strategic endeavours.

“ There is a sense of urgency to drive progress across the climate change, environmental, and DRR nexus ”

There is a sense of urgency to drive progress across the climate change, environmental, and DRR nexus. We need to shift the narrative of climate change actions from women and girls being viewed as victims to demonstrating their leadership as agents of change. As farmers, producers, workers, consumers and household managers, women are important champions in driving low-carbon, climate-resilient development pathways. When addressing climate change consequences and developing/implementing policies and plans the different needs of all gender groups must be considered, paying additional attention to discrimination based on gender, age, disability status, and ethnic affiliation. Every climate action should be preceded by a rigorous and intersectional gender analysis that assesses the situation and informs the actions. As UN Women's Executive Director Sima Bahous recently stated, empowerment and resilience must go hand in hand, and while crises are threat multipliers, women and girls are solution multipliers. ■

Gitanjali Singh is country representative, UN Women.



PHOTO:UNSPASH

A woman of substance

Kazi Amdadul Hoque

The chars of Bangladesh have always been a thing of wonder- rising from the water and going back under it- time after time. The people living on these temporary islands possess a different kind of resilience altogether. Surrounded by water, their world must only lie within the confines of the char (riverine island). The boat takes a few hours to come, and the nearest market is an hour away. Recent times have seen a rise in flood incidents, and people living in the chars have learned to live with the worst of nature's calamities in silence.

Shahinoor, from the remote village of Madaripara, Gaibandha, was not born privileged. Like her neighbours, she too saw most of her life through the lens of climate change and disaster. Unlike the others, however, she chose to find a way to rise above her plight and make life easier for herself, and others.

People living on the chars lack the resources and opportunities to make themselves resilient. Come rain, or worse, floods, they are submerged and left without a source of food or medicine to survive the waters. This was apparent in the 2020 floods too, where more than a hundred people, most

of the children, died due to drowning in the waters. As per primary data, displacement rates for submerged communities hit 40%, while 93% of the unions faced disruptions in income generation and social activities. In the same floods, it was seen that 73% of the unions affected, suffered from healthcare disruptions and compromised nutrition. The brunt of these issues befell pregnant women, adolescent girls, and children, among others. Dependency on aid further increases food insecurity. In Madaripara, Gaibandha too, with the nearest market a boat and a bus ride away, these very issues turn into a tale of abject misery, every time disaster strikes.

With an aim to make communities like these self-reliant, through resources, training, and linkages, Friendship NGO crafted a climate change adaptation initiative. The formation of community groups called Friendship Disaster Management committees is always the first step towards climatic action. These groups are created based on community consultation and collective decision-making done in the presence of female, male, young, old, and disabled people. The participatory assessment and planning identify the initiatives that need to be taken through community-initiated disaster risk reduction (CIDRR). This approach is a shared responsibility between a community, the NGO, and the local government for preparedness, emergency response, and resilience.

One of the many requirements identified for Shahinoor's

community was vegetable seeds. Vegetable seeds, planted on homesteads and rooftops, are a quick solution to ensure immediate access to nutritious food and double as a source of income for the locals. However, community members would usually have to spend much more than the price of seeds on transportation to get to the marketplace. Friendship organized training, followed by the distribution of vegetable seeds which would eliminate the need for them to go to the marketplace altogether. In addition, the locals learned tips and tricks on how to safeguard their crops during times of floods.

Friendship also distributed certain breeds of poultry and livestock to households. The animals were distributed keeping in mind their resilience and ability to withstand disasters. Special breeds of ducks and sheep were chosen for this purpose. The idea was that in addition to vegetables, the dwellers of the chars would also be able to sell eggs, milk, and even the animal itself, should the need (capital for new business) arise. The variety and items were based on available space, interest, and scope. The capacity exchange on disaster risk reduction was also part of skill building, followed by climate change adaptation within the community, and with the addition of some other enabling tools.

The Friendship NGO facilitated the creation and successful continuation of a community contingency fund, and the nurturing of key linkages to the various government offices that the Friendship team had introduced them to. This would ensure that the people in the community remained self-reliant long after their initiative was complete. Most importantly the practice and promotion of empowerment, equity, and leadership would be set in motion, with women at the helm.

Soon, the people of the community realised that the seeds and the livestock were giving out more benefits than were required in their homes. The community decided that once they had enough vegetables, eggs, and dairy products from their livestock for themselves, they would sell off the surplus at the marketplace. Many among, them went so far as to set up small-scale businesses that generated a steady stream of revenue. This enabled the people in the chars to also set up the said community contingency fund where all earning family members put in their weekly and monthly savings. This little nest egg would be used to help them during times of duress and fund small-scale adaptation measures.

Shahinoor too received these packets, livestock, and training and was greatly benefitted. Although she owned no land to her name, she grew crops on leased land and was able to make a good living for herself. Her sheep had given birth twice over the year and had managed to multiply from one to eight. “Each would be sold for about 5,000-6000tk!” she says, jubilant at her success. The community was better off than it had been in a while and Shahinoor earned, saved, and built herself a sizeable saving amount.

There was still, however, one concern. As with numerous other char communities living around water, the number of boats available to Shahinoor’s community was appallingly low. The dilemma is not new or exclusive to the people living in these areas. The 2020 floods and the 2022 flash floods brought the same problem to light. As areas became inundated with water, villages, and localities floundered to survive. They grappled with waterborne diseases and lack of electricity, proper sanitisation, and safe drinking water, remaining in the abject plight for days until the water receded. It was not a relief that people wanted; they wanted to be saved and put into flood shelters. Unfortunately, there was a severe shortage of rescue boats that could reach these people and bring them to safety.

Over time, as Shahinoor’s basic needs started to be met, she became more and more empowered through training, learning, and the confidence lent by success. She started to look towards the glaring issues that people in her char faced, in terms of transportation. There was only one boat, and it was not enough. The boat needed to adequately fill up before it could justify the trip, and during times of personal emergencies, that was not a viable option. Medical emergencies posed a different problem. The boat came every two hours and by the time it came through, the damage was usually irreversible. In times of hazards, one boat was simply not enough.

Shahinoor wondered if the problem could be solved by adding a new boat. Could it help the people of the community become more resilient in their adaptation methods? As cashier of the community contingency funds, she decided to break into the contingency funds of the community and with everyone’s approval, and a massive contribution from her end, built their community a new boat.

She took 8000tk as an interest-free loan and adding some savings managed the cost of building the vessel to 25,000tk. The people of the community contributed some timber for a noble purpose. This boat was large, spacious, and very welcome for the uses of the char dwellers.

She may have built the vessel with mostly her money but never once did her leadership fall short in the face of greed. Shahinoor has since lent the boat out to various unnamed benefactors without making any money from them. They too always came back with her boat and their gratitude. Emblematic of the grit and empowerment of one woman, today, the boat has fondly come to be known as “Shahinoor er Nouka”. Helping during small and big issues, Shahinoor er Nouka continues to shine as a beacon of hope and strength, for the people of Madaripara, Gaibandha in Bangladesh. ■

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Women are collecting potable Water from their own managed Pond Sand Filtration (PSF) Plant

PHOTO:COURTESY

Women-led community water governance

Palash Sarker and Jesmin Akhter

Mollahpara, a living place of approx. 300 families of Vamia village under Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira district. The story of the sufferings of acute potable water is not different compared to other coastal villages of Bangladesh. But the way they are managing the problem compels us to turn back the flashlight to them. The women of this place have come forward and taken the leadership role to solve the drinking water problem by themselves.

Climate change induces coastal salinity intrusion into the freshwater for which 20 million coastal people are suffering from the crisis of safe drinking water in the coastal area of Bangladesh. Though water is an essential requirement of human life and livelihoods, access to safe drinking water is very limited for the people of these areas which becomes extreme during the dry season. The sea level rising is one of the major causes of salinity intrusion

into freshwater aquifers. Natural disasters like cyclones, tidal surges, river bank erosion, and flood are very frequent in Bangladesh and pollute the freshwater with salinity and create an acute drinking water crisis. Initiatives have been taken widely by the government and non-government agencies to reduce the scarcity of drinking water by installing different adaptive measures such as Pond Sand Filtration (PSF), Community-Based Rainwater Harvesting, and Water Desalination Plants. But the mechanism for equitable utilisation and sustainable management by the community people was not in place, which resulted in the failure to reduce the suffering of the people for a longer period. It is important to create access for vulnerable people to drinking water by different adaptive measures, and similarly important to make it effective significantly for a longer period of time.

Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) focused on reducing the climate risk especially for women and children due to climate change impacts.

The approach is to “Bring Women in Action” to reduce the potable water crisis and to establish a local-led management system at the community and household levels. CCDB facilitates women to raise their voices, initiate solutions and finally get them involved in management practices to solve problems.

Traditionally in Bangladesh’s rural areas, women are the main ones responsible to collect and manage water for the daily fulfillment of the families. The women of the Mollapara were seeking a suitable and sustainable source of potable water. Considering the crisis of almost 250 families, CCDB extended the support by installing a Pond Sand Filtering system at Mollapara of Vamia village in 2017 to fetch water from walking distance. Prioritising sustainable community management rather than creating some short-term solutions, CCDB mobilised the women of Mollapara and formed a Management Committee to transfer the role for the sustainability of the efforts. The 30-member Women-led Management Committee established a community water governance system in a participatory way where approx. 200 vulnerable families are getting access equally to reduce the potable water crisis. They developed a guideline on water distribution and collects a minimum monthly fee for the maintenance of the PSF round the year in a transparent way. From 2017 to 2023, the continuous six years of successful management portray the effectiveness of women’s leadership. The excitement blooms in Sufia’s words, the leader of the group, “We, the women, were always treated as water collectors, now people used to call us the water manager”. The treasurer Taslima Begham described how they are ensuring transparency through monthly meetings and using the additional money for women’s welfare. The community fund, skill, and local management have been established through this initiative to serve women for a long time.

“Women play a central part in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water” was agreed in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. As women are closer to water resources, they mostly take responsibility for collecting water. So, Women have appropriate knowledge about the use and management system of water resources. CCDB’s ‘Bring people in action’ of this strategy gives room to the ‘Bring women in action’ to create equitable water access for people of the coastal community in Bangladesh. This women’s participation and leadership role is bringing positive social changes at the community level. It reduces the water conflict among community groups, provides safe drinking water, helps to decrease waterborne diseases, and uses natural sources (rainwater) properly. This women-led community water governance system can make the PSF technology a successful adaptation practice and be replicated by other communities and development partners.. ■

“ This women’s participation and leadership role is bringing positive social changes at the community level ”

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