



RE

Mental Health
& Climate Justice

FRAME

Mental Health & Climate Justice

Re-vision

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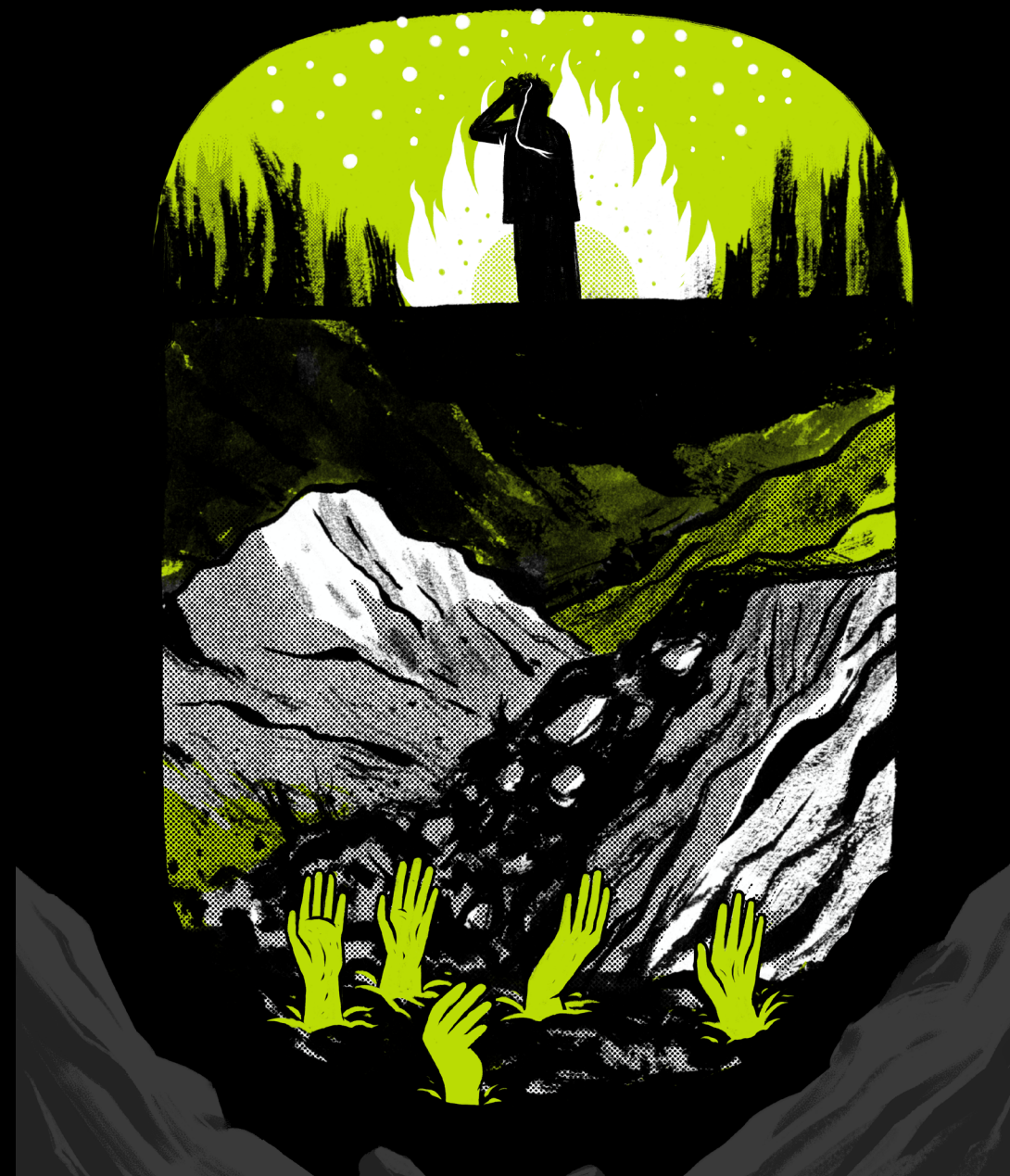
MHI's work

Glossary & References

We aim to highlight a variety of topics and voices; but will not be able to be exhaustive in our material. The views expressed in ReFrame are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of Mariwala Health Initiative. Articles are accepted in good faith and every effort is made to ensure accuracy.

Re-vision

Framework
Power
Structures
Systems



Women with Psychosocial Disabilities

Intersecting Disasters and Climate Change

BY ASHA HANS

Introduction

Disasters exacerbate existing gender inequalities and women with disabilities specifically find themselves excluded from Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) efforts and plans. As increasing disasters are the outcome of climate change, we cannot disconnect it from considerations of gender and disability. Gender is one of many factors that influence how we are impacted by and respond to climate change. Women are, however, not a homogenous group, and women with psychosocial disabilities are disproportionately affected by existing social discriminatory attitudes. Extreme weather conditions ranging from floods, cyclones, and forest fires to heat waves, weak monsoons, excessive or less snow to unseasonal rains are responsible for the risks confronting their lives and livelihoods. We need to, however, highlight how women's experiences are uniquely shaped by the way that social norms and laws intersect with the different dimensions of DRR and climate change.

Methodology

This article is the outcome of fieldwork conducted in Rajnagar Block of Odisha, India during May and June 2022. This region is routinely affected by severe cyclones and a sea-level rise that has been eroding the coast. Data was collected from 50 households and one FGD conducted in the Kaintha village cluster. The data brought to light the issues women with psychosocial disabilities living in the Mahanadi Delta of India face.

Currently, the policy focus on mitigation is at the international level, where disability is marginalized. On the ground, adaptation matters to people, especially when it comes to those with multiple marginalisations such as women with psychosocial disabilities.

Mahanadi Delta and the impact of climate change on women with psychosocial disabilities

For this article, only psychosocial disability case data has been included: Padma is 30 years old and hails from

the Mahanadi Delta on the Odisha coast of India. As the sea level rose, her village was washed away and the family was forced to move inland. They had been farmers and now their land was lost. For the sake of her physical and food security, Padma was married off to a farmer when she was just 15. She lives with a psychosocial disability, and when her husband passed on, and with three children to take care of, her mental health worsened. Padma took on farm work to provide for her children, but the challenges never abated. The sea rose again and salinated her land, forcing the farming to be abandoned. Today, she lives in a small, one-room thatched house on the edge of the eroding sea coast that continues to be affected by frequent disasters. She has joined a demand-driven livelihood program for the Indian rural population called NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) which provides work for 100 days in a year, but neither work days nor wages have been regular. Her eldest daughter, only 12-years-old, has left school and is waiting to get married. The sons attend a nearby

school where mid-day meals are provided to the students. Despite the vulnerability consequent to loss of livelihood, Padma has found work and maintains social contacts within the village. She has, however, found no place in the government's relocation planning or adaptation plans for climate change.

Originally from a coastal village that no longer exists, Jyotsana moved to a smaller village with her fisherman father and family. Fishing as an industry has had limited growth in this region, and as the fish quality deteriorated, so did the family income.

As the sea surged, Jyotsana's mother began to fear that the water would enter their home. The trauma affected her capacity to work and 14-year-old Jyotsana had to leave school to take care of her siblings. Her mother's mental anguish was deepened by the loss of the community that had originally existed around them. To ensure that she would be around people she had known before, the

family decided to move closer to a relocated colony. This helped her find mental support and relief. Jyotsana's father meanwhile started a micro business to be able to pay for their food. Though India's Public Distribution System (PDS) is designed to help ensure food security for underprivileged communities, Jyotsana's family hasn't been able to access it as they have no papers to prove their identity. These records are tied to geographical location and there is no allowance for portage of entitlements. So, the family continues to live on the edge of nutritional insecurity.

Kanchan lives within the Mahanadi Delta hotspot region and belongs to a community that has been designated as Scheduled Caste. The breeze here is strong, and the constant stress of the sea level rising and moving inland has affected her psychologically. The effect on her has been severe enough to cause a stroke that has led to paralysis. A frontline (ASHA - Accredited Social Health Activist) worker, she can no longer earn as her mobility is limited due to inability to

access a wheelchair. Life at home is challenging due to the unavailability of a toilet inside. Kanchan admits that the situation has led to suicidal ideation, and that she has not been able to even reach the sea so as to consider drowning. Her son has now migrated and the remittances from him have been providing for her food and medical care.

Research Outcomes

Though the cases cited in this article are few, they affirm emerging evidence of intersecting vulnerabilities that disasters and climate change can create in women's lives. We need to take into account that women with psychosocial disabilities, as referred to in the case of Padma, Jyotsana, and Kanchan, are among the most 'resource poor' within a community. This is due to poor access to education, lack of income or low/irregular income, social exclusion and limited access to decision-making, and little access to or control over those resources which would facilitate adaptation. The legal support provided by India's

Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 is limited (Salekar 2017), and the National Action Plan on Climate Change overlooks disability rights. Women's awareness of the legal and administrative provisions of the 'Guidelines on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction' (2019) of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), and of its guidelines on 'Psycho-Social Support and Mental Health Services in Disasters' (2009) is low.

The voices of women are not heard in the climate and disaster conversations, especially because disability considerations will allow for more inclusive climate change solutions to be created.

Conclusion

Community support provides women with disabilities the resources to survive. Adaptation strategies of migration and livelihood schemes have been important strategies for survival as well. As climate change constitutes a serious and escalating threat to the lives, health, and safety of populations around

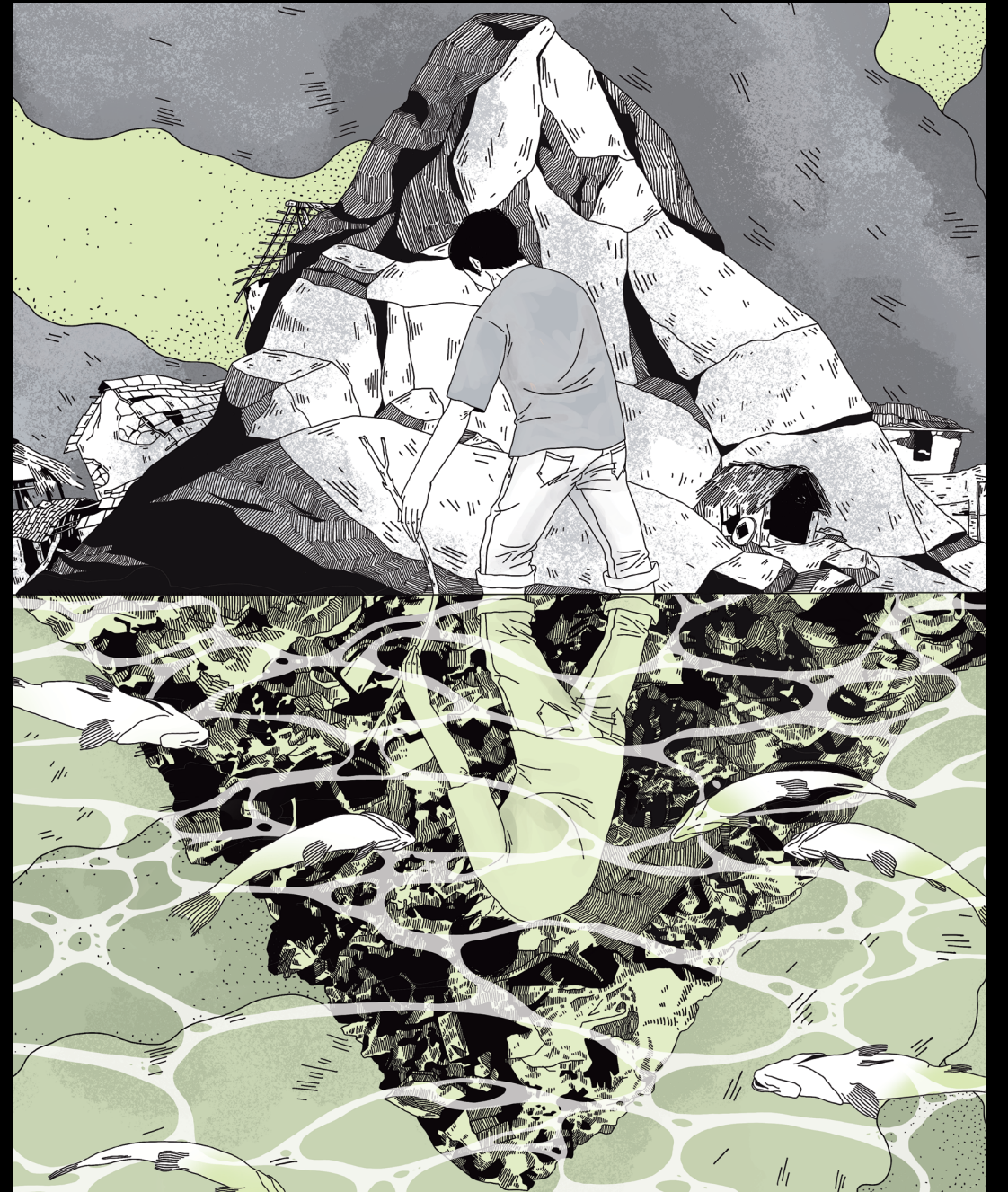
the world due to extreme weather vents, this article would contribute to the extremely inadequate research evidence available on the impact and the input of women with psychosocial disabilities, concerning climate change.

Asha Hans, Ex. Professor of Political Science and Founding Director of The School of Women's Studies, Utkal University, heads SMRC (Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre, Odisha) an Organisation of Persons with Disabilities. She authored the NDMA's National Guidelines on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction, and has worked extensively on Gender and Climate Change.

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Our place in the family and the community determines how we cope with disasters, and climate change, whether we can access health care, migrate to a city or not.
”

Engage

Implementation
Practices
Psychosocial Factors



Changed Destinies in the Eastern Himalayan Region

How Climate Change Has Undermined the Development Aspirations of Marginalised Communities

BY RITURAJ PHUKAN

The National Highway connecting my hometown to Guwahati was home to thousands of marooned families for several weeks this year. Men, women, and children were forced to live on the road for weeks, sharing their space with livestock and companion animals, the shacks clearly insufficient to provide any protection from the periodic thunderstorms. One side of the highway was barricaded after a person was run down while he was having dinner. I was dismayed by the helplessness of these women and children; the lack of toilets and privacy exposed them to indignities unimaginable in this modern era.

Last year, a global survey of 10,000 young people across 10 countries revealed “profound psychological distress” attributed to the climate crisis, with anxiety and distress affecting daily life and functioning, worsened by perceived government inaction. Most respondents from the Global South including India and the Philippines were

concerned about the “frightening” future (Hickman, et al. 2021)

Previous studies have shown that psychological distress about climate change exists, with affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, and that such natural disasters have long-lasting effects on mental health and consequences including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and general anxiety.

Floods are expected annual occurrences, but I have seen the frequency and intensity increase since my childhood. This year, the first wave of floods in May was unexpected, with the heavy rains and landslides devastating the hill district of Dima Hasao and other areas with the loss of over a hundred lives. For millions of children, repeated waves of floods, landslides, and erosion will lead to innumerable loss of school days and, sometimes, the total end of schooling and any hopes of a better life.

Studies have found that specific groups like children, the elderly, women, people with pre-existing mental illness, the economically disadvantaged, and the unhoused are at higher risk of distress and other adverse mental health consequences from exposure to climate-related or weather-related disasters. As climate change undermines children’s mental health, it disrupts educational and occupational opportunities, with increased stigma, discrimination, and social marginalisation. These evident consequences across the region need to be documented for targeted responses and remedial measures.

The forecasted loss of over a third of glaciers in the Eastern Himalayas by 2100, even if warming is contained to 1.5°C, will be equally disastrous for montane and riparian communities. Residents of highland regions, mostly indigenous people, will be affected by the future decline of glacial runoff in terms of the effects on agriculture. People in the lowland regions

affected by floods and erosions also suffer long-term consequences undermining resources and resilience, compromising health choices like poor diet, inadequate physical activity, and reduced or no access to health services, adding to the mental distress. These aspects are further aggravated in the underdeveloped and remote villages of the Eastern Himalayan region.

Last year, Assam was listed among the 8 most vulnerable states by the “Climate Vulnerability Assessment for Adaptation Planning in India Using a Common Framework”. The national climate vulnerability assessment report from the Department of Science and Technology placed 60 percent of districts in Assam under the highly vulnerable category. Another recent study revealed that six of India’s eight most flood-prone districts during the last decade are in Assam, reinforcing its place as the worst flood-affected state in the region. Besides the mandated

committees and action plans, there is no urgency or proactive action to mitigate the long-term and short-term health consequences for affected communities.

Earlier scientific assessments have found that communities that rely on the natural environment for sustenance and livelihood, as well as populations living in areas most susceptible to specific climate change events, face an increased risk of adverse mental health outcomes. These findings are applicable to the indigenous communities of the Eastern Himalayas, who are at a higher risk of hardship from impacts like flooding because of pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerability, history of exploitation and conflicts, and social stigma.

Despite insignificant contributions to the accumulation of greenhouse gases, indigenous people are among the first to face the direct impacts of warming. These communities are

proudly connected to the natural world and biological diversity is celebrated in their art and music. Loss of forest cover, decline of native biodiversity and proliferation of invasive vegetation, and the consequent loss of indigenous food sources have emerged as direct threats to the food security of forest or fringe forest dwellers dependent on natural resources for sustenance.

It must be mentioned that the latest State of Forest Report showed a further decrease in the area under forest cover across the northeast region, despite an overall increase for India, in continuation of a declining trend since 2009. Compounding the problem is rampant encroachment, with 60% of India’s encroached forest areas located in the northeast, and Assam again being the worst affected.

Personally, I believe that ensuring indigenous people can access traditional foods in the face of

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At the camps for the flood affected, the elderly are despondent about a lifetime fighting poverty and hunger, but the children must be mentally readied to fight a system that fails to address the basic human development aspirations.

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warming impacts is climate justice. Most food, medicines, and ingredients for traditional liquor are derived from the native vegetation, and preserved according to traditions passed down from one generation to the next. These are important to their cultural identity and societal fabric, but also vital for health and well-being, affecting personal immunity, community resilience, and fulfillment.

Indigenous peoples are vital to creating a dynamic adaptation and mitigation pathway and there are many examples of how different communities interpret and react to the impacts of climate change, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find creative solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes. Traditional ways of preserving food, like smoking or fermentation, practiced by indigenous communities are perhaps the best insurance for their food security, and mental and physical health in times of disasters. Planning for the future should include

enhancement and support for the adaptive capacity of indigenous peoples integrated with disaster preparation, land-use planning, environmental conservation, physical and mental health support, and sustainable development strategies.

At the camps for the flood-affected, the elderly people are despondent about a lifetime spent fighting poverty and hunger, but the children must be mentally readied to fight a system that fails to address their basic human development aspirations. Considering the vulnerabilities of the Eastern Himalayas, it is imperative for policy-makers to integrate mental health into the agenda for proactive mitigation responses during climate-induced disasters.

Developed countries like the USA and Japan have incorporated mental health elements like the deployment of psychiatric teams, nutritional advisories, and help centers into the protocol for emergency responses. Countries of the Global South could

leverage their experiences in crisis preparedness for an integrated global system in highly vulnerable areas like the Eastern Himalayas. The government must strive to ensure the opportunity to overcome the protracted effect of climate change on mental health for an equitable and sustainable future.

The empowerment of community leaders is important and hopefully, these marooned children growing up on the roads will someday represent India on global fora to negotiate the allocation of climate funds for the region. Conspicuously absent from global climate negotiations are indigenous people representatives from India, particularly from the Eastern Himalayas, despite being among the worst affected. Finally, the deliverance of climate justice, like all other aspects, is tied to climate finance, and it should be our endeavor to have representation from the affected indigenous communities in these negotiations for the allocation of funds to the region.

RE

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Meenal Rawat
Olimpika Oja
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DESIGN

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Abhishek Choudhury
Athulya Pillai
Debangshu Moulik
Studio Ping Pong
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