

Study examines women's ability to adapt effectively to climate change

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New research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) suggests that male migration and poor working conditions for women combine with institutional failure or poverty to hamper women's ability to adapt to

climate variability and change in Asia and Africa.

There is growing concern about sustainable and equitable adaptation in climate change hotspots—locations where climatic shifts, social structures, and livelihood sensitivity converge to exacerbate vulnerability.

Examining gender within these debates highlights how demographic, socio-economic and agro-ecological circumstances combine in complex ways to impact the experiences and outcomes of climate change in specific contexts.

Entrenched [social structures](#) create power relations that shape women's and men's experiences of vulnerability through their access to resources, divisions of work, and cultural norms around mobility and decision-making, all of which determine their ability to adapt.

Drawing on data from 25 case studies across hotspots in Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tajikistan) and Africa (Kenya, Ghana, Namibia, Mali, Ethiopia, Senegal), the study shows how and in what ways women's agency, or ability to make meaningful choices and strategic decisions, contributes to adaptation responses.

The study, published today in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, involved researchers from the UK, Nepal, India, Pakistan and South Africa. They argue that [environmental stress](#) weakens women's agency even when household structures and social norms are supportive, or legal entitlements available. This leads to household strategies that place increasing responsibilities and burdens on women, especially those who are young, less educated, and belonging to lower classes, or marginal castes and ethnicities.

While male migration for work does contribute to enhanced incomes,

the degree of such support is both uncertain and irregular. Confronted with issues of everyday survival, in the absence of supportive infrastructure and services, women often work harder, in poorer conditions, and for lower wages, across the hotspots studied, with negative wellbeing outcomes, seen particularly in the neglect of their health and nutrition.

Lead author Prof Nitya Rao, of UEA's School of International Development, said: "In a sense, women do have voice and agency, as they are actively engaging in both production and reproduction, yet this is not contributing to strengthening longer-term adaptive capacities, or indeed their wellbeing.

"Our analysis suggests that some common conditions such as male migration and women's poor working conditions combine with either institutional failure, or poverty, to constrain women's ability to make choices and decisions. However these barriers, if addressed in creative ways, could potentially strengthen adaptive capacities, and enable more effective adaptation."

The findings have implications for the effective implementation of multilateral agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, through its Gender Action Plan, and commitments to gender-responsive adaptation as outlined in the Paris Agreement, along with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals.

These agreements require insights into what builds the adaptive capacity of women and men in specific contexts in order to support sustainable, equitable, and effective adaptation.

The authors suggest that, firstly, effective social protection, such as the universal public distribution system for cereals in India, or pensions and

social grants in Namibia, can contribute to relieving immediate pressures on survival, creating some room for manouvre.

Secondly, rather than creating competition among individuals and households, such universal benefits can support processes that strengthen collective action at the community level. This however cannot always be done on the 'cheap'; investments are needed to enable better and more sustainable management of resources. Women's Self Help Groups are often presented as solutions, yet they are confronted by the lack of resources, skills and capacity to help their members effectively meet the challenges they confront.

While not discussed in depth in this paper, the authors say competitive markets are not working to strengthen women's agency, rather they end up undervaluing and appropriating the labour of poor women, but equally men in the case of migration.

"There appears to be a clear case for regulating labour markets to ensure decent work, whether for women or migrant men, but this is proving difficult in a globalised context," said Prof Rao.

The study uses [case studies](#) from three distinct regions: 14 in semi-arid regions, six in mountains and glacier fed river basins and five in deltas. Predominant livelihoods are agriculture, livestock pastoralism, and fishing, supplemented by wage labour, petty trade or business, and income from remittances.

These areas face a range of environmental risks including droughts, floods, rainfall variability, land erosion and landslides, heatwaves, coastal erosion and cyclones.

'A qualitative comparative analysis of women's agency and adaptive capacity in climate change hotspots in Asia and Africa', Nitya Rao,

Arabinda Mishra, Anjal Prakash, Chandni Singh, Ayesha Qaisrani, Prathigna Poonacha, Katharine Vincent and Claire Bedelian, is published in *Nature Climate Change* on November 25, 2019.

More information: A qualitative comparative analysis of women's agency and adaptive capacity in climate change hotspots in Asia and Africa, *Nature Climate Change* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-019-0638-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0638-y) , [nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0638-y](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0638-y)

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