**Women, climate change and health**

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Climate change has impacted many people worldwide, from Syria and Turkey to Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan. Coping with the recent floods has left a lot of the population of Pakistan hanging by a thread.

Aside from the economic losses, there are many other problems, and the female population bears the brunt of most of them. It is estimated that about 80 per cent of the people displaced by climate change are women, according to UN Environment.

Climate change is leading to the spread of diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, hepatitis gastroenteritis, and tuberculosis which are transmitted by insects, humans, and exacerbated by poor access to clean food, water, and healthcare. Women are at increased risk of these diseases especially due to the pooling and stagnation of flood and rainwater, and lack of sanitation measures.

According to the UNDP, women and children are 14 times more likely to die during a climate-induced disaster. The role of caregivers puts them at high risk for not just contracting disease but further spreading it. This fact alone is incredibly alarming and could very well become a leading factor that drastically changes the overall picture of the health of the population.

Women are also more likely to be affected by extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and storms, which are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change. Women who live in low-income countries and in rural areas are particularly vulnerable, as they often lack the resources and infrastructure to cope with the impacts of these events. Women are more likely to die or suffer injury during natural disasters, as they are often responsible as caregivers for children and the elderly and may not be able to be evacuated or seek shelter.

A major effect of climate change is the decrease in the availability and quality of food and water, which can have a significant impact on women's health. Women and children in these circumstances are 14 times more likely than men to die because of severe storms, tornados, and floods. Moreover, they are at risk of violence, disease, and death during such movements.

Women in many cultures, especially ours, are often responsible for collecting water and preparing food, which means that they are more exposed to the effects of droughts and floods. In addition, climate change can lead to crop failures and a decline in agricultural productivity, which can exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition. Malnutrition is especially severe for women since women in rural settings have more children than urban populations and malnutrition is often the final blow to their already weak health.

Mothers of young children are also very prone to the effects of food shortage and malnutrition due to breastfeeding and this in turn also affects the children. Nearly 700,000 pregnant women in Pakistan were deprived of maternal healthcare during the floods. Furthermore, malnutrition and disease during pregnancy and young age can lead to many developmental disorders like spina bifida, kwashiorkor and marasmus, etc. Besides anxiety and trauma, girls with their periods had no menstrual care, and an estimated 70 per cent of women in flood-affected areas suffered UTIs from lack of access to bathrooms and from using dirty fabric in the place of clean pads.

Girls and women experience significantly more violence, compared to boys and men. This is especially true for those who have been displaced or resettled, as women are vulnerable targets for various types of exploitation such as domestic servitude, forced prostitution, and even organ trafficking. Unfortunately, women face numerous obstacles in seeking help, making it difficult for them to escape these situations.

Climate change can also have significant impacts on mental health, with women particularly vulnerable to this. Women may experience anxiety and depression in response to the trauma of extreme weather events or the loss of homes, livelihoods, and communities. Women who live in areas affected by climate change also experience social isolation, as they may be forced to migrate or adapt to new living conditions. They are also forced to take up jobs that put them at high risk of physical and mental stress. While it is understood that the indirect effect of climate change can have immediate results in the form of depression and anxiety, society often overlooks the lasting change it brings: post-traumatic stress disorder.

Once a person has experienced traumatic events such as extreme weather events, loss of homes and possessions, and displacement, life cannot possibly be the same. People experiencing one-degree Celsius higher temperatures were found to be 21 per cent more likely to have an anxiety disorder. They were also 24 per cent more likely to have both depression and anxiety together. They find it hard to adjust to new lives, even if they manage to rebuild homes. The fear and feelings that accompanied the climate change events stay with them through life, season after season.

Climate change refugees also face stigma and discrimination from their host communities, either due to the economic problems created by a sudden increase in population, or legal status, which can exacerbate mental health problems and cause people to live in a state of alienation and discrimination.

Overall, the physical and, often ignored, mental health impacts of climate-change refugees are significant and require attention from policymakers and mental health professionals. Addressing the mental health needs of climate change refugees will require a comprehensive approach that includes both individual and community-based interventions, as well as efforts to address the underlying causes of climate change and displacement.

Prioritizing women in policies is pivotal for empowering them and will support Pakistan in meeting SDG 5 – gender equality along with climate action.

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