



# Women's Bodies

# in War, Peace and Climate Change in Pakistan

**Life Line.**  
In Southern  
Pakistan, women,  
some with their  
children in tow, head  
towards the river to  
fill up the heavy jars  
they carry on their  
head.

Photo by the author.

By Bushra Khaliq

*Pakistan is said to be the 12th most vulnerable country to the effects of climate change. At the moment, it is already witnessing severe pressures on its environment and natural resources. And to counter more losses, Pakistan would need to allocate around five per cent of its gross domestic product for mitigation and adaptation alone.*

**Although** this warning already came from Pakistan's prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, his government has yet to sense the urgency of the problem. Pakistan remains too busy fighting the United States-led war around the borders. Pakistan has found itself trapped in a complex political quagmire where it is now fighting the war on its own. There is also no media uproar nor popular movement on climate change issues.

At the bottom of such silence are women who are expected to perform even harder in times of distress and disasters, when the families' livelihood is in peril, when migration becomes immanent or when communities are on the brink of sinking. They have yet to be heard as people who are deeply affected or as stakeholders who have much to contribute. They still cannot yet talk about the burden of their bodies.

The country's north eastern parts, particularly Balochistan already experienced droughts in 1999 and 2000, causing a sharp decline in water tables, drying up wetlands and severely degrading ecosystems. Precipitation has decreased 10 to 15 per cent in the coastal belt and hyper arid plains over the last 40 years<sup>1</sup> yet there has been so much rainfall during summer and winter in the north.

Some parts of the country are also submerging. One example is Keti Bandar, that used to be the richest port in the coastal belt region. Because of erosion, it was gobbled by the Indus river. Today what remains of Keti Bandar is a thin stretch of isthmus that serves as a bridge to the mainland.<sup>2</sup>

Keti Bandar was also known for its mangroves. Now the landscape is barren, dotted with thatched houses on mudflats.

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Water clogging and salinity have been among the major problems behind the intruding seas that have almost washed away the villages. Thousands of peasants and fisherfolks have already migrated to other areas in search of livelihood. Moreover the cyclones that visit the coastline have increased their intensity, driving more and more people into poverty.

Climate experts in the country are also hinting at severe water scarcity as well as disrupted food production. More and more flooding is bound to drive away millions who are living in low-lying areas.

Of the millions that are now bearing the brunt of the increasing degradation of the environment and drastic changes in the climate, women are the most severely affected. Local environmentalists estimate that 70 per cent of the poor, who are far more vulnerable to environmental damage, are women. Moreover, women are likely to be the unseen victims of resource wars and violence that result from climate change.

We witnessed this phenomenon in the droughts in Balochistan, where women and children suffered the most. Unlike men, who could leave the town, women and children could not just run away. Most Pakistani women are also primarily dependent on natural resources like land, forests and rivers, that it becomes difficult for them to find an alternative ground where they could access the resources they need for their families.

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Women farmers are also severely affected as floods and droughts have decreased the country's yields by 30 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Agriculture is the single largest sector in Pakistan's economy, contributing 21 per cent to the GDP and employing 43 per cent of the workforce, with women consisting the majority.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, women produce 60 to 80 per cent of food consumed in the household.<sup>5</sup> As 50 to 63 per cent of men migrate, it is the women who look after the land particularly in the mountainous regions.<sup>6</sup> Despite such contribution, women's work is almost invisible, hardly attracting public recognition.

While women are the main providers of food in Pakistan, they face barriers in owning and accessing lands. Sixty-seven per cent of women are engaged in agriculture yet only one per cent of them own land. With climate change and disasters, women find it several times more difficult to cope and recover.

The scarcity of water further impacts on women and girls' acquisition of lifeskills. When reservoirs become fewer and when forests become farther, the domestic chores of collecting water and firewood become more burdensome and time-consuming. In assisting their mothers in performing these tasks, girls tend to have less time for school and other activities.

But even without climate change, the rural population has been kept illiterate. Feudal landowners see to it that people are kept away from school. Mullahs declare girls' education to be un-Islamic. And instead of building schools, they build armies. Worse, women and girls continue to struggle for the autonomy of their bodies, with the restriction on informed choices.

**Living with the River.**  
The river has been the extension of their household. It is here that women also wash themselves and their laundry.

Photo by the author.



Population control is not the solution to climate change. Instead we need to look at the very fundamentalist forces that are at the root of political domination and resource wars and their resulting human rights deprivation and violations and environmental degradation.

Nevertheless women must be the sole managers of their own bodies and sexualities, where their capacity and will to survive and live ultimately rest. Reproductive rights is a taboo in Pakistan. In our culture, it is believed that with more children, the stronger the family becomes. Never mind even if the women would have wanted to feed and care for less children.

Such disregard of women's contribution to the community and women's human rights gives us reason to believe that gender will not be articulated in the forthcoming national policy on climate change. Unless women are included in its planning and operation, Pakistan's newly established mechanism, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), will likewise be gender blind. ■

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Jamal Shabid, (2009), "Climate change effects to hit Pakistan hard: IPCC chief," URL: <http://www.dawn.com/2009/01/14/top5.htm>
- 2 Saadia Qamar, (2009), "Port suffers impact of climate change," URL: <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/Regional/Karachi/26-May-2009/Port-suffers-impact-of-climate-change>
- 3 LEAD Pakistan, (2008), "Pakistan's Options for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation." URL: [http://www.lead.org.pk/cc/attachments/Seminars\\_Conferences/5\\_BHC\\_ISB/BHC\\_ISB\\_Session\\_Schedule.pdf](http://www.lead.org.pk/cc/attachments/Seminars_Conferences/5_BHC_ISB/BHC_ISB_Session_Schedule.pdf)
- 4 International Union for Conservation of Nature, (2007), "Gender and climate change: Women as Agents of Change." URL: [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/climate\\_change\\_gender.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/climate_change_gender.pdf)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Asian Development Bank, (2005), "Pakistan 2005 Earthquake Preliminary Damage and Needs Assessment," URL: <http://www.adb.org/documents/reports/pakistan-damage-needs-assessment.pdf>