Gender and Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Adaptation to Change (in Particular Climate Change)

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Assam, North East India’s most populated state, and Arunachal Pradesh, the region’s largest state by area, both lie in the Brahmaputra river basin, which is flood-prone and witnesses severe river bank erosion. Here, erosion happens throughout the year, not just during the flooding season. In recent decades, the intensity and frequency of floods and erosion have gone up, also due to climate change impacts. ‘Agricultural (or meteorological) droughts’ are becoming common, and rains play truant during the critical, needy stages of crop development. Agricultural losses have increased manifold and are preventing economic development in both states. Traditional agricultural practices – like rearing fish in rice fields, which helped women supplement their family’s diet – are becoming affected by the disasters. Vulnerabilities to recurring disasters are gender-skewed because of the existing gender gap and the different roles of women and men. Water availability, for example, is a women’s issue. Men often migrate seasonally or permanently leaving women to look after the house and the flooded fields. Gender indicators in the two states reflect the overall Indian gender biases like women’s lower nutritional status and command over resources. In addition, domestic violence and trafficking has increased in Assam; and polygamy, abuse, and child marriage continue to be big issues in Arunachal Pradesh. Some civil society initiatives to help women deal with disasters in Assam include building hand pumps on raised platforms. Arunachal Pradesh has fewer such interventions. However, the Assam Chief Minister envisages improving the gender indicators, including gender budgeting, by 2016; and Arunachal Pradesh’s State Action Plan on Climate Change articulates the need to address women’s concerns, though gender parity is still a long way off.