Politics and Local Realities in the Darjeeling Himalaya – Lessons for Gender-Climate Discourses

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The Eastern Himalayan region presents a highly heterogeneous eco- and biodiversity which is matched by the region’s diverse ethnic fabric. Recent climate dialogues tend to generalise the region predicting environmental hazards and climate interventions. This ecological broad brush matches the sweeping positioning of mountain women as vulnerable victims and/or formidable champions in climate analyses. This paper outlines how political and ethnic conflict, poverty, and fragile ecologies jointly shape unique challenges to heterogeneous groups of local women and men from the Darjeeling region of the Eastern Himalaya. In embittered political struggles with a distant and unrepresentative state, critical poverty-gender-environment disparities, in particular local realities of water insecurity and injustice at local levels take a back-seat. In the Darjeeling region, a critical mass of women political activists and a deafening silence on local women’s struggles around a diminishing water availability, which has acquired a near crisis situation locally, begs attention to eulogised climate narratives on women’s inherent environment nurturing roles. Women political activists make up a diverse constituency; however, in the absence of vertical or lateral collective action on environmental and gender issues; there are few options for these women in adopting or advocating on environmental issues and concerns. This paper cautions against the popular plan to hitch an assumed mass of environmentally-inclined homogeneous mountain women to mitigating climate-gender agendas in the region; urging attention instead to understanding why and how climate sharpens critical gender-poverty-water disparities locally.