



Climate Justice Briefs: Rural Women's Adaptation Strategies

India

Adaptation as a matter of survival: The need for empowerment and capacity building among Dalit and Irular women in Tamil Nadu State



Impact of climate change on rural Dalit & Irular women

The participatory action research team of local Dalit and Irular women, already among the most vulnerable groups in the country, report that recent changes in climate have led to widespread agricultural failure, and with it, the rapid degradation of their traditional sole source of income.

Economic stress has taken its toll on women's health in this region. Women report malnutrition and increased violence in the home due to economic stress.

Dalit and Irular women report increased burdens as drought diminishes income and forces displacement. Women report that drought has triggered sale of agricultural land to multi-national companies for industrial use, and that due to discrimination and lack of education, Dalit and Irular women are unable to secure jobs in the formal sector.

Among women's responsibilities are water and firewood collection. Drought exacerbates women's

burdens since women must travel further distances to accomplish this physically-demanding task. Women report that due to water scarcity, they must now devote an increased proportion of their time to unpaid work.

Gender, discrimination, and barriers to adaptation

Dalit and Irular women have adopted numerous coping strategies in the wake of economic stress and food insecurity. However, patriarchy and caste reinforce disenfranchised Dalit and Irular women and limit their opportunities for adaptation. Therefore most adaptation practices are limited to survival strategies. In general, women's leadership is not accepted at either the community or family level. This lack of empowerment is particularly acute among Dalit and Irular women. Further, Dalit and Irular women's lack of control over resources inhibits their ability to adapt to climate change.

Faced with the disappearance of their traditional income, women report seeking alternate employment. Women in one village report a shift among some Dalit women to floriculture,

About this project

This 2011 participatory action research was conducted to document the impact of climate change in our communities, discuss how climate change exacerbates gender inequalities, and present our policy demands to promote meaningful change for women in our community.

Women from five villages in Vellore district in Tamil Nadu contributed to the participatory action research.

Weather events & local effects of climate change

Dalit and Irular women in this region acutely feel adverse impacts of climate change. All women reported a changing landscape, noting extreme weather - high temperatures, floods, variable seasons, and drought - recent depletion of trees and agriculture. Reported outcomes include pest infestations, reduced crop yields, and lost income to already-vulnerable Dalit and Irular women.



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Multi-layered discrimination against Dalit & Irular women

Women from the Dalit caste and Irular tribe are among the most marginalised groups in the country, facing extreme poverty and multi-layered discrimination. The majority of Dalit and Irular women are landless and work as agricultural labourers. Even within their class, women are valued less than men. Irulars are entirely dependent on land and land-based resources for livelihood, and some report working as bonded laborers in the region. Both groups face extreme poverty and starvation. Child labour is common among these groups.

while Irular women report working as wage labourers in charcoal or brick-kilns. These alternate sources of income are often coupled with occupational hazards such as dangerous tasks and lack of safety measures, attributable to discrimination and lack of bargaining power.

Women face tremendous pressure to ensure the survival of their families, forcing many to work more hours for less income. Further, many women report increasing their economic burden by taking out loans.

Women noted changes to their food habits, including scaling up kitchen gardens, more carefully managing food, and forgoing meals. Other women report opting into a national program that assists families of five or more in generating income.

Further, women report adaptation measures that include increased collective farming, whereby women jointly cultivate land that is either given to them by the government or taken in lease. Others have adapted by cultivating short-term and intermediary crops that are less susceptible to drought and flood. Women also report harvesting rainwater with governmental support.



Impact on gender relations

As women suffer lost income, they report increased discrimination, losing even the “little respect” they received before the disappearance of their traditional income. Women feel increasingly demeaned. Women’s roles in the community have not changed as a result of adaptation; they are merely forced to bear additional burdens.

Policy recommendations

Most government programs do not reach Dalit and Irular women. These women are not afforded protection against discrimination and face numerous barriers in achieving political participation. Though the law demands equal treatment of men and women, Irular and Dalit women are deprived of their due respect, property, and dignity.

Degradation of local agriculture is furthered by the alienation of agricultural land for industry, as well as women’s right to land ownership. Government intervention is needed to prevent further alienation and conversion, and to scale-up opportunities for Irular and Dalit women to participate in communal farming. In addition, given the loss of traditional income, support is needed to ensure alternative employment for women with decent working conditions.

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