

Gender Issues in the *Char* Areas of Assam

Char areas are tracts of land surrounded by the waters of an ocean, sea, lake, or stream; they usually imply, any accretion in a river course or estuary. The *Char* area found in south-eastern Asian countries are characterised by where female and children experience inferior health and uncertain survival. The social structure is influenced by the patriarchal social order that strictly regulates gender roles in *Char* areas. The women performs a variety of roles and functions from processing of harvest, rearing livestock, homestead gardening, etc. and enjoy lesser rights as men; in matters of migration to cities like Guwahati, Dibrugarh for livelihood generation activities. The women stays at home in state of vulnerability i.e., flood, food insecurity, etc. in absence of male guardianship.

In India, these *Char* areas are mostly found in the states of West Bengal and Assam and experience similar gender outcomes where women are seen mostly in roles of primary food producers and providers. They are regulated by their male members, be it father, husband or their sons in sphere of generating or controlling income and women's involvement in wage labour, restricting responsibilities for managing the household. The set of norms is widely enforced and is a determinant of the spectrum of activities and behaviours within which women are expected to operate. The norms limits are at the basis of gender-specific vulnerabilities in rural society, regulating female social and economic mobility all the while positioning women as primary



Photo: AIDMI.

caregivers and caretakers of their households and kin.

The All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) conducted a Situation Analysis (SitAn) of Women and Children in three districts in the *Char* areas of Assam. The issue identified were the following:

- 1) In *accessing resources* women had minimal access to income, credit, property control, knowledge and training. Their access to resources was inhibited by socio-cultural barriers. Their participation in the socio-economic actions i.e., labour in informal sector, income generating activities, as they bear the workload of managing household when men migrate for work which reduces women mobility, and is low as compared to men participation. They were bound to act upon the orders of their husband or another male head of family. However the trend of liberty

tended to increase due to NGOs and Government interaction, intervention and information dissemination on themes of women empowerment. The women are subtly introduced with the notion of inferiority and obeying one's husband implicitly. In Dherir *Char* the women restricts themselves speaking in presence of elderly men which, and the empowerment activities enabled essential shift in perspectives in understanding their rights.

- 2) In *spheres of decision making power*, women in the SiTAN study area had little decision-making power. They did not possess equal opportunity in making important family decisions. The rural women are the leading decision-makers in some specific areas of post-harvest activities such as storage and seed production whereas; economic control and decision-making powers are totally

vested in the hands of men as the household authority.

- 3) Socio-cultural obligations necessitated women to undertake certain responsibilities. For instance, only a few women got wages for their work in the region, most women either assisted other family members on the fields or did household chores without getting any wages. The nature and scope of the tasks performed by women were often dictated by men.
- 4) In *social ceremonies*, participation of women were less in few districts. Women generally carried out preparations of marriages and other ceremonies which were related to household level. At society level, they were almost not permitted to participate due to the society's values, norms and culture. This reduces the contribution of women and limits their opportunity to participate in the wage market.
- 5) In *management of household* women perform all household activities that mean they are the key person at household level. However, the women have no
- 6) In participating in *natural resources management* women had almost no access to manage the natural resource. They manage the natural resources at household level but rarely at the community level. Women play a major role in agricultural related pursuits like sowing, land preparation, harvesting, weeding, fodder collection, gross cutting, fertilization, transportation, irrigation and marketing of agricultural produce i.e., vegetables to nearby local market.
- 7) There were cases and incidents of harassment and assault experienced by women. In some

cases, sexual harassment was faced by women at workplaces and public sphere such as in market or while working in agricultural fields. According to personal observation and informal interview at field, there is no large-scale violence against women in society; incidents of domestic violence at the household level are on the rise.

The inquisition of women or gender-related issue is a significant issue; as women play an extremely important role in every society, yet they are deprived of rights and dignity along with facing gross negligence and discrimination. The analysis of observations made during the situational analysis of char area posits the gender perspective to vulnerabilities and deprivations in the chars of the Brahmaputra, Assam. Gender issues in char areas are undergoing transformation with the development in social change processes. Increasing landlessness and increasing poverty and natural disasters are exerting new pressures and conflict in the household. The women of char areas faces, food insecurity during flood, limited amounts of freedom due to harmful discreet practices of child marriage and restricted social and economic mobility. Intervention to alleviate poverty with micro-credit mechanism, increased income generating activities would enable greater participation in household decision making. With programme focusing on awareness -raising, education and constant advocacy, concerted efforts in implementing sustainable and durable change from various stakeholders would facilitate equal opportunities for the women of char areas of Assam. ■

- AIDMI Team



Photo: AIDMI.