

# CASE STUDY

August 2020



**The unending woes of  
Women in Kosi**

*“Until the embankment came up in the Kosi river basin, the mighty river flowed right here, strong and powerful. But after the construction of these manmade structures, it changed its course and moved farther away. Of course, we seemed to gain many obvious advantages due to the embankment; but the few issues that have cropped up, make us realise that we were much better off before all this construction came up here.*

*Quite a bit of our village land was acquired under the Kosi project; even the land that we had received as bhoodan<sup>1</sup>, was lost to it. We live on a land where floods were a regular part of our lives and the embankment construction saved us from the constant berating we received from the floods every single year. In the flood season we were as good as marooned by the floodwaters in our village, and finding a small, dry piece of land to cook food was just not possible. So, we build machans<sup>2</sup>, put our stoves over them and cooked on these rickety, makeshift contraptions. For clean, drinking water we travelled by boats to the railway station. Our whole day was spent fighting the floodwaters at every step. And with the rising waters came the fear of snakes, scorpions and other life-threatening animals. In spite of this, the women would bravely wade into the water to collect fodder for the cattle and scavenge all possible vegetables for family meals.*

*A bigger problem for us women was defecation. Men would simply climb the tall trees and complete their job sitting on the low hanging branches; for the women it was a nightmare. To make things little easier, mounds of mud were entrenched around the village, where we could go for our morning ablutions. Early morning, we would have to climb a boat, ferry ourselves to reach a faraway place to do this daily ritual. Till the floods continued we were as good as jailed in our homes. The boat was our saviour, and to feed our empty stomachs we often looked up to the government for help. Even though it was there, just to reach the distributions centres and collect the provisions and packets was a great challenge. More ever, our fields were inundated, the standing crops destroyed.*

*Unfortunately for the villages that lie inside the embankment areas, this situation has not changed a bit. Women inside the embankment areas grapple with the same issues and problems even today.”*

This is what Anju Mishra, an ex-*panchayat* committee member from Chauhatta village that lies in the Kosi basin has to say. This *panchayat* has 11 wards, of which ward numbers 1, 2 and 3, lie inside the embankment area.

For the wards that lie outside the embankment, it is a different story. They cite the advantages of the embankment and appreciate the fact that they are free from the floods and its related issues that occurred there. They are happy that they could easily travel even during the flood season without any problem. However, they too have begun to face a recent difficulty. Due to the seepage and rains that occur, their land is now waterlogged and faces inundation. Now they too are

marooned for nearly four to six months every year and travelling between these perpetual islands surrounded by flood water has become tricky. Also, when the rivers are in spate (suddenly flooded), the water flows over the embankment and forms large stagnant pools. Rain adds to their misery, and the land becomes deeply waterlogged, as there is no place for all this accumulated water to escape.

### Livelihoods in trouble

The eastern and western embankments built in the Kosi basin to prevent floods have largely had adverse impact on the women living there. From keeping the children safe to collecting wood for fire, all these everyday tasks become a huge challenge when floods occur.

Sanitation issues add to the complications. Additionally, as livelihood options are few, male members migrate to other towns and cities in search of better livelihood opportunities, leaving the women with an increased burden of farming, labour work in the fields along with responsibility of taking care of the children and the elderly.

Thus, even though the land inside the embankment has been ruined by floods, river and silt, the land outside is in no better condition today. It is waterlogged and farming here is very difficult. Many women toil in neighbouring farms for as less as Rs 50 per day, even though a man gets twice this amount for the same amount of work. It is tough for the women to find

<sup>1</sup> The **Bhoodan Movement** or **Land Gift Movement** was a voluntary land reform movement in India. It was initiated by Acharya Vinoba Bhave in 1951. The Bhoodan Movement attempted to persuade wealthy landowners to voluntarily give a percentage of their land to landless people.

<sup>2</sup> Raised platform built temporarily to escape from floods

work for the whole month on a regular basis; MGNREGA<sup>3</sup> is as good as not accessible here. With very few income generation options available, many times, it is impossible to ensure even a square meal for their families.

Along with money, basic resources to run a household are absent or challenging to procure. A major difficulty is finding fuelwood in these circumstances. The women trudge nearly two kilometres till Malhani Sukhpur, where there is a *bageecha* (garden) from where they collect fallen leaves and twigs. Garden owners refuse to allow women to forage for wood, and often screams, shouts and hurls obscenities at them. Once the dry leaves and twigs were burnt rather than given to the women in need. And as women forage for fuel or travel by boat to the market, they are at a perpetual risk of sexual harassment. Susceptible to sexual overtures and unnecessary physical assaults in this confined environment, their complaints hardly ever reach police authorities.

### The unknown, unseen cost of travel

*Poonam* is from *Khairai Muldah*, and her husband left for Delhi in search of employment and a better life for his family. Today, she alone takes care of her family and her home. Her village *Minahi* is about twenty kilometres from her farm. To be able to reach and work on her farm, she first walks till *Rohniya Ghat* and then takes a ferry to reach her fields. When the rains are heavy, boats are the only answer; but when there is less



rain, the rivers carry lesser volume of water and break into smaller streams on which boats can no longer ply. Then it becomes extremely difficult and even dangerous for her to travel alone. *Poonam* therefore has to always plan her travel for essentials with a larger group of women going to the same destination /direction, but this is not feasible always. Whenever she has to travel alone by herself, she is scared and tries to make it back home before dark.

*Dukhni Devi, Tara, Jaitun Hassan* and *Devi* from *Khokhnah's Amin Tola*, say that to travel by boat they have to pay a fare. Travelling is both cumbersome and expensive. Often the boats capsize, resulting in the death of women and young girls travelling by boats, a common occurrence in these areas.

### Unmet basic needs

Basic amenities and sanitation facilities are lacking inside and outside the embankment areas, affecting women the most. In many wards, other than toilets, no other facility is available, while inside the embankment, toilets are as good as non-

existent. As floods and erosion (land-cutting) change the village landscape often, displacing people every year, the community has adapted - building only temporary living structures. In such a situation making toilets is not a priority. Although there is no restriction on building houses inside the embankment area villages under the **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana**<sup>4</sup>, officials often cite floods and erosion as reasons to rarely approve housing or any other schemes in these areas.

*Neelam*, a 60-year-old woman, living in *Kharail Maldah*, emphasizes that the government has failed to address the pain of those affected by the Kosi embankments; there is no programme or scheme for their welfare or well-being. "Today we get no benefit from any housing schemes or any loan at the time of requirement from the bank, as we have no legal right over our homes. For any scheme or loan to ensue, the government or even the bank needs property papers, which we do not possess and so are left bereft of all of these."

Safe drinking water is another

<sup>3</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aims at enhancing livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

<sup>4</sup> Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, a scheme of Govt of India, aims to fulfil the housing requirements of the rural poor



major issue here in the whole of Kosi region. The government installed taps far and wide , however, the local taps discharge iron rich water. The buckets and mugs are lined with a yellowish coating when water is stored for a long time in them.

Everyone understands that this water is unclean, unhygienic and the cause of all kinds of diseases. This water is not potable, and the women here ask tartly how someone who earns Rs 50 per day can be expected to buy a water jar for Rs 20 every single day.

### Conclusion

Women in the Kosi basin may face the floods and the aftermath waterlogging stoically, but their vulnerability is much greater than that of men.

Hygiene, sanitation, drinking water, privacy and gender induced violence are issues that affect women and young girls immensely, making it difficult for them to try and rebuild their lives, year after year after a devastating cycle of floods and lost livelihoods.

Most of these experiences on gender issues in the Kosi basin reflect on women as victims, but very little attention is paid towards understanding gender differential priorities, preferences, challenges, and opportunities. One of the reasons behind this, is the paucity of documentation on the specific vulnerabilities of women who have been suffering on almost every aspect of life and livelihood. The development discourse of the Kosi Basin lacks a

gender narrative. There is limited evidence-based intersectional data on the role of differently positioned women in adapting to the impacts of flood for better livelihoods.

For addressing gender related issues in the Kosi basin, there is a need to make clear gender commitments in programmes and policies responsible for development in the Kosi region. Cognizant of the drivers of change and the heterogeneity of impacts, livelihood generating opportunities for women need to be enhanced.