

The Battered Generation: Precarity of ageing people and people with impairments in climate-affected borderlands

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Abstract

All people inhabit the same world, but global warming and subsequent climate adversities do not affect everyone in the same way. People who are already marginalised due to aspects of their identity—race, religion, age, gender, or ability—face compounded vulnerabilities. With a particular focus on elderly people and people with disabilities, this short article presents cases of three families who live in villages spread across the southwestern borderlands of Bangladesh while coping with a less predictable climate. It draws connections between their experiences with erratic climate patterns that collide with structural inequity and social injustice.

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Satkhira and Jashore are two southwestern districts of Bangladesh, bordered by India on one side and the majestic mangroves of the Sundarbans and the Bay of Bengal on the other. Once home to a diverse ecology, lush greenery, and entangled rivers and waterways, the region has borne the brunt of a changing climate. Deltaic communities struggle to keep pace with the ever-growing intensity and frequency of natural shocks like floods and cyclones, which in turn leads to fast-eroding rivers. As locals grapple with a new climate reality that sways in extremes—of heat waves, cold spells, and erratic rainfall—they must also navigate uncertainties that often plague borderlands. Elderly people and people with disabilities face particularly entangled vulnerabilities. This article brings attention to them by sharing the experiences of Kishor, an 80-year-old man from Munshiganj’s Munda

community;¹ Aparna, a 90-year-old Hindu woman from Debhata; and Ali, a 55 year-old man with disabilities from Keshabpur.²

Environmental degradation and disasters disproportionately affect both vulnerable groups. As a cyclone was approaching her village, Aparna was struck with fear, uncertain of what to do to stay safe. She recounts being outside when she first heard the cyclone alert, yet instead of finding a nearby cyclone shelter, she opted to make the trip to return home to her flimsy thatched house. Her thinking reflects women's long-held fear of multipurpose shelters as unsafe—as well as unprepared for and unreceptive to elderly people's needs.³ Given that cyclones have become more frequent, many older women like Aparna regularly face impossible choices. Current shelter options collide with deep-seated beliefs about their dangers to such an extent that older women would rather ride out storms on their own.⁴

For those living with disabilities, climate-exacerbated challenges present a shrewd reminder of how institutions can perpetuate exclusion. In the past, Ali used to earn his living by trading raw goods, but an impairment has impeded his ability to move without support. Enlisting himself into the government's disability allowance scheme presented to be a bureaucratic nightmare, with Ali caught up in the whims of corrupt elected officials who consistently disregarded him. He later found two willing journalists who helped with the enlistment, only to realise that the aid he would receive once every three months was far from enough. Ali has explored different income-earning strategies. He and his wife had even migrated for work to India a few years ago, hoping she would earn a higher wage as a day labourer on the other side of the border. Although she earned more money in India, she could not sustain the double responsibility of being a breadwinner and caretaker by herself in a foreign land for long. After they returned home, Ali's wife

¹ The Munda people are an ethnic group also referred to as *Bunos* (jungle clearers). Their livelihoods have primarily depended on the Sundarbans and adjacent arable land.

² Munshiganj and Debhata are union councils (the smallest rural administrative unit in Bangladesh) within the district of Satkhira; Keshabpur is a union council in Jashore District. The interactions with respondents were facilitated by a research project funded by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, in partnership with the Asia Foundation and sponsored by the UK Government. The interviews and reflections referred to in this article were conducted between 4 and 7 June 2024, and the transcripts remain with the authors. Pseudonyms have been used to retain respondents' anonymity.

³ M Faruk, S A Ashraf, and M Ferdous, 'An Analysis of Inclusiveness and Accessibility of Cyclone Shelters, Bangladesh', *Procedia Engineering*, vol. 212, 2018, pp. 1099–1106, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2018.01.142>.

⁴ Tribune Desk, 'Deadliest Cyclones in Bangladesh's History', *Dhaka Tribune*, 26 May 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/347566/deadliest-cyclones-in-bangladesh%E2%80%99s-history>.

fell ill and their son began to look after both his parents. As the sole earner of a five-member household that also includes his grandmother and young wife, the son, a clerk at a local clinic, constantly worries about the looming threat of storms stealing the tinned roof over their heads. The post-cyclone water-logged state of their neighbourhood interrupts Ali's son's much-needed income, compounding the family's debt. Bereft of what he describes as 'dignified' choices, Ali now frequents Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, to beg for alms.

Kishor, like Aparna and Ali, never attended school. His life, as chartered out by his forefathers, led him to become a farmer. But now his ageing body cannot keep up with the harsh demands of working in the fields, and he finds himself having to rely on his daughter and son-in-law's help to sustain himself. Kishor quietly remarked: 'When he [son-in-law] earns, I eat. When he does not, I starve.' Meanwhile Kishor's daughter left her job as a school teacher to provide round-the-clock care for her ageing parents. Like Ali's son, the burden of her new role intensifies with climate shocks. For example, the stress and fatigue from surviving the last cyclone left Kishor quite ill and knocked down the family's only toilet. Climate disasters make it more difficult for Kishor and families like his in their poor neighbourhood to ever get ahead. In these climate-vulnerable borderlands, elderly people and people with disabilities are a battered generation, witnesses to the climate violence that is shaping their lives. Ageing in this region has meant passively observing a steady stream of shifts in their lifeways.

Both metaphorically and literally, climate-induced changes make life less sweet: a community member in Jashore recounts how his famous *kebejur* (date molasses) does not taste the same anymore. Life becomes all the more bitter since the borderlands are far from the support and oversight of the central government. In the void created by the absence of good governance, corruption has flourished. An illegal shrimp farming economy has thrived, which has worsened the increasing climate change-related salinisation of land and water. Kishor describes its effects on his family: 'My family has lived here for generations. I once grew paddy here and raised cows and goats... but not much is possible with salinity-infested waters now. We can neither drink it [the water] nor grow produce with it.' Seeking support from local authorities has resulted in humiliation and harassment. During Eid, while waiting for rice from a local official, Ali's wife was ridiculed. The official taunted her—'Are you pretending that your husband is dead? He is alive?'—implying that a woman is only truly deprived when her husband passes, thus discounting the jarring reality of someone living with a life-altering disability.

The experiences of these individuals, trying to make a living amid climate precarity, reveal the challenges for particularly vulnerable groups such as elderly people and people living with disabilities. Through their stories we also see how suffering is not isolated and engulfs extended families. Kishor, Aparna, Ali, and many others from regions grappling with climate change urgently need a range of social support, financial assistance, and inclusive planning. Otherwise, they

will continue to lurch from one climate crisis to another with no end in sight.

As global climate financing and the international aid sector face shrinkage, advocacy must be leveraged to sound alarms for those with intersectional fragilities to ensure that they are prioritised in future policy-making and responsive action.

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