

## **Women Forced Displacement By Tehri Dam Project**

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### **Abstract**

This paper by me examines the lived experiences of displaced women based on the empirical findings of research that looks at women displaced by the construction of the Tehri Dam and their relocation elsewhere. Development-induced displacement has brought about a profound economic and sociocultural disruption to the victims of displaced communities. While forced displacement affects both men and women, women experience displacement and relocation in a particularly gendered way. This differential impact on women occurs due to the gendered division of labour that has arisen from socio-historical processes of men's traditional incorporation in the wage-earning and labour-oriented tasks while women remain on the land jobs and its management on a daily basis. Resettlement and rehabilitation policies expose the male biases inherent in the insensitivity of the governments towards needs of women. The Tehri dam case study applied a culture-based understanding of the dam displacement processes in Uttarakhand in north India through the lens of the affected women. The question asked was: "How do women experience displacement and relocation in the dam project?" In a region where women and children make up the majority of the displaced population, insensitivity to the needs of women has shaped post-rehabilitation programmes in a way where women face impoverishment, income decline and destitution. The eight interlinked potential risks intrinsic to displacement identified in Cernea's model manifest themselves in the daily lives of these displaced women. They suffer from loss of land, joblessness and homelessness.

**Keywords :** [Displacement](#), [rural women](#), [rehabilitation and resettlement issues](#), [India](#)

## **Introduction**

In this patriarchal set-up, the women have been denied compensation for the land they had cultivated for years but did not have a patta (land deed) in their name. Cases of ineligibility have been identified in many households headed by women and widows have been excluded from compensations in the resettlement package. Since only men are recognised as heads of households, the compensation is often paid only to them.

The resettlement process is fraught with impoverishment risks and the reconstruction remains incomplete. Women are forced into adopting a culture they have never known, and limitations in their social space have prevented them from rebuilding their daily practices in a new environment.

Thus, the women remain marginalised at the community level as well as at the national level policy framework because of their disadvantageous position ascribed by patriarchal gender relations.

The narratives of women clearly brought out the insensitivity of state discourses to the needs of women. Although the national R&R policy acknowledges gender as a category in the resettlement process, the implementing agency is the state government. That is why state government policies should consider these problems to enable the participation of women and move towards gender justice. This narrative-based approach highlights the concerns of women affected by displacement processes for consideration by policy planners whose decisions in the name of “development and public purpose” have far-reaching implications for women.

Many of them live in tin sheds as they have lost their traditional houses and cannot afford to build new ones. They also suffer from a loss of access to commons, which creates a fodder and fuelwood shortage and decline in income and food diversity. The women face further hardships when community support structures disintegrate and family and kinship networks break down. Systems of care, protection, compensation, and R&R remain largely insensitive to women’s needs leading to a fundamentally disenfranchising experience.

The main aim of the project is to investigate “How do women experience displacement and relocation in the dam project?” through the case study of Tehri Dam and its impact on women. Cernea’s (2000) model of displacement was used to identify the women’s risks of forced displacement. The eight interlinked

potential risks intrinsic to displacement identified in Cernea's model as landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property and social integration manifested in the daily lives of these displaced women. In a region where women and children make up the majority of displaced population, insensitivity to the needs of women has shaped post-rehabilitation programs in a way where women face impoverishment, income decline, and destitution. They suffer from joblessness and homelessness as many of them live in tin sheds; they have lost their traditional homes and cannot afford to build new ones; they suffer from a loss of access to commons, which creates fodder and fuel wood shortage and decline in income and food diversity. The findings revealed that systems of care, protection, compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) remain largely insensitive to women's needs leading to a fundamentally disenfranchising experience.

In the interviews conducted, women complained of lack of basic amenities like water, loss of land rights, discrimination in compensation, and absence of a sense of well being and security. These observations substantiate the claim of the World Bank Report (2019) that men and women are affected differently by dam projects. Women are harder hit by resettlement than men, since they are more likely to earn their living from small businesses located at or near their residences. Women may also be affected disproportionately in rural areas since they are more often dependent on common resources. These experiences can be traced back to the historical processes of gendered division of labor. The male biases perpetuate gender inequality, and state institutions and policies are insensitive to women's needs that are far different from a monetized economy. Processes of development are not gender neutral, a gap exists in the ways in which distribution and calculation of benefits of development is accomplished. Contributions of women as the invisible workforce remain uncalculated and men have disproportionately enjoyed benefits. A gender gap exists in both policy and practice. Thus, gender justice remains distant discourses. The resettlement process is fraught with 'impoverishment risks' and the reconstruction remains incomplete. Women are forced into adopting a culture they have never known, and limitations in their social space have prevented them from rebuilding their daily practices in a new environment[1]. The narratives of the displaced women interviewed clearly brought out the insensitivity of state discourses to the needs of women. Although the national R&R policy

acknowledges gender as a category in resettlement processes, the actual resettlement and rehabilitation is a state issue. The processes of displacement transform the everyday lives of women from a community owned network to individual private property ownership that undermines the socio-economic status of women. State policies should take into consideration these problems to enable participation of women and move towards gender justice. Ensuing narrative based approach highlights the concerns of women affected by displacement processes, for consideration by policy planners while making decisions that make far reaching transformations in the lives of women in the name of 'development and public purpose'.

Rural women in India also have faced problems in terms of compensation and employment issues after displacement because of a gender-biased policy ([Asthana, 2018](#)). It is observed that jobs have been given to displaced men as they are considered to be breadwinners. Women are being forced into 'low' jobs in the market and get low wages. After the loss of common property resources, most of the displaced women are dependent on the single salary of the husband. Forced displacement has a direct consequence on the health of the affected people due to the spread of infectious diseases like malaria, diathermia, typhoid and the lack of nutritional food. Increased morbidity and mortality rate were also seen among displaced families. Health diseases are not only associated with infection but also stem from psychological depression. The villagers, especially the cultivators, are deeply attached to the soil and their home. Displaced people wish to live with their kinsmen at the new place. They grow up attached to their ancestral property and with a close bond with neighbours. Displaced women face gender inequalities within the society and family. In fact, policymakers also discriminate against displaced women in terms of resettlement and compensation. Studies have reported that forced displacement increases the rate of domestic violence; productive economic activities of women decrease or cease and as they do not remain productive contributors, their social status is lost; their authority and right in decision-making weakens ([Koushal, 2009](#)). Studies also reveal that displaced women face immense emotional stress ([Asif, Mehta, & Mander, 2002](#)): High rates of male migration, leaving women with the children and the house, create stress for women, who often have to look for additional income to support children's education and health. Women suffer great hardship in urban slums with regard to sanitation and privacy. Displaced women face lots of problems when their social networks get affected and also due to the loss of their source of income. And due to

the loss of kinship and social networks, displaced women are unable to get suitable matches for their daughters.

## **Conclusion**

Large-scale development projects often result in massive displacement of population. Based on an ethnographic study of the people displaced by the Tehri dam in India, the present paper examines the impact of displacement on women and demonstrates that their experiences of displacement and resettlement are qualitatively different from those of men. Displacement not only results in physical dislocation, but also in women's disempowerment. Resettlement policies and programmes, in the Indian context, have largely remained gender biased and fail to take into account the differential experiences of women, making resettlement a difficult process for them. I argue for a better understanding of women's experiences of development-induced dislocation and a subsequent refocusing of policy.

In India, there is an absence of a uniform national resettlement and rehabilitation policy. Whatever policies are there for the displaced people in the country have not focused on the issues of women. Women are the worst victims of development and displacement. The problems of displacement are enormous for them. It is clearly seen from the aforementioned discussion that women face discrimination with regard to resettlement, compensation and rehabilitation aspects. Policymakers have not paid adequate attention towards displaced women. Displaced women face multiple problems such as economic, social, financial and health issues. The Land Acquisition Act, 1984, does not have any specific policy for the compensation of women. Displaced women are forced to move and change their traditional means of livelihood. They lose their social and cultural identity after displacement. They suffer from joblessness, homelessness, helplessness and powerlessness. They suffer from a loss of access to common resources such as fodder and fuel wood which results in a decline in income. In the patriarchal society of India, women have been denied compensation for land and all the resettlement acts. In fact, women have been

cultivating land generation after generation but do not have the right to register it in their name!

The country needs a policy change so that displaced women can receive proper benefits. Before the construction of any development project, a proper survey should be conducted and women's concerns should be addressed. It should be kept in mind that both the central and state governments should work together with regard to resettlement and compensation processes, and special care should be taken so that the marginalized sections of society do not face problems because of development projects in the future.

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