

# Gender-based Security Strategies Under Climate Stress Conditions: A Case Study on the Munda Community in the Sundarbans, Bangladesh



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## Abstract

*This paper explores the interplay of ethnicity, gender, and security of the Munda community in Sundarbans, Bangladesh, under the climate stress conditions. The Munda community—a small ethnic minority group—migrated from India, faces greater challenges, largely due to recurrent impacts of climate change. Existing literature shows that the Munda community is mostly illiterate, solely dependent on forest-based resources, and contains a distinct ethno-cultural identity. These led to societal marginalisation in land acquisition and low political participation, with Munda often labeled as a 'defeated society'. In this context, this study addresses factors contributing to the sense of insecurity within the community, with climate change being a pivotal factor. In doing so, the study has followed the exploratory approach based on the empirical evidence collected from Garage Bazar, Burigoalini, and Gabura of Satkhira upazila through twenty in-depth interviews and six FGDs conducted separately between men and women in December 2023 and January 2024. The paper elaborates on four basic components of human security for the Munda community: freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from dignity, and freedom from vulnerability to explore the factors of insecurity as well as resilience practices. Data found that environmental degradation, water scarcity, and climate change highlight the need for holistic mitigation strategies and sustainable development initiatives to secure the everyday life of the Munda community. The paper suggests that empowering the Munda community requires addressing various forms of insecurities and resilient practices, which can help narrow socio-economic gaps and promote a more inclusive society.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Security, Munda Community, The Sundarbans, Climate Change

## Introduction

Bangladesh is widely known for its climate vulnerability due to its location, low-lying land, population density, and overwhelming dependency on natural resources for livelihoods. The country has been ranked seventh as an extreme disaster-prone country, according to the Report of Global Climate Risk Index 2021.<sup>1</sup> The Sundarbans—the world's largest mangrove forest—is situated in the southern part and is considered

the lung of the country. It produces about one-fifth of the country's total oxygen and protects the country from disastrous natural calamities such as Amphan, Fani, Mora, Roanu, Mahashen, Aila, and Sidr in 2020, 2019, 2017, 2016, 2013, 2009, and 2007, respectively. For Bangladesh, it is not only a saviour from natural disasters but also contains rich biodiversity. About 6,00,000 people are directly and indirectly dependent on the resources of the Sundarbans. Storm surges, cy-

clones, salinity intrusion, and waterlogging create a climate-stress environment for the community dependent on the Sundarbans. The conditions are getting worse due to the impact of climate change, as the frequency and intensity of disasters have increased manifold. A study conducted by the National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Services, USA, estimated that only Amphan has changed the landscape of forests by about 83 percent.<sup>2</sup> Every year, around 63 percent of the shoreline erodes around the Sundarbans, and it moves towards the land, which reduces the forest area as well.<sup>3</sup> The diversion of freshwater flows for agriculture and industrial production by the upstream country, which is mandatory for the main species of the Sundarbans, is also destroying the biodiversity of the forest and increasing the salinity. Besides these natural factors, several human-made ones, such as cutting down trees, overusing natural resources, pollution by upstream countries, encroachment, and conflicts between people and animals, are also putting the forest and the communities under a lot of stress. The Sundarbans are home to Munda—a small ethnic minority community—who have been living there for more than 200 years (late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). The Munda people, previously referred to as 'bunos' or jungle-clearers, migrated from Bihar, India, to assist in the reclamation of land for agricultural purposes on behalf of zamindars (landowners) and the excavation of lakes and ponds. According to historical accounts and the information gathered from the community's elders, the Munda people migrated to Bangladesh as agricultural laborers. They have lived here ever since the British brought them here to cultivate land in the Sundarbans, having previously settled in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Chhota Nagpur in India. Previously, this community had owned property in Bangladesh, but they gradually lost it. Today, due to overlapping claims and a lack of proper documentation, numerous Munda families are struggling to acquire land (classified as *Khas*), which falls under government jurisdiction.

The Munda community possesses a distinct language, culture, and customs that distinguish

them from other communities. They are on the trajectory of becoming forgotten people due to their deep integration with the local communities. The Munda is characterised as a socially disadvantaged group due to exhibiting limited literacy skills and limited capacity to read and write. Although the government has emphasised providing education to them, progress has been modest. The situation has deteriorated further in light of the COVID-19 outbreak and the impact of Cyclone Amphan. In addition, the resumption of fishing activities in the Sundarbans is hindered due to the breeding season of fish occurring in July and August every year. Men and women, nonetheless, face different forms of vulnerabilities due to their gender roles and the norms of society. The combined impacts of these have resulted in the Munda population facing severe social and livelihood insecurities.

Having this brief introductory background, the primary purpose of the study is to find out the gender-based factors that lead to insecurity faced by the Munda community. In addition, the study aims to propose the best ways to protect the Munda community's forest-based livelihoods in the face of climate change. To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, this study has answered the following questions:

- What are the factors that bring gender-based insecurity to the Munda people, both at the community and individual levels?
- How do Munda men and women ensure their security under climate-stress conditions?

### **Literature Review**

Research has indicated that worldwide, individuals belonging to minority groups across various races and ethnicities exhibit increased vulnerability to disasters and display a lower propensity to flee when compared to the wider population in nations. There is a link between being a member of an ethnic minority group and not having easy access to up-to-date information about risks, and not having enough money to get help dealing with those risks. This phenomenon happens because of disparities in the distribution of resources, variations in cultural norms, and

the marginalisation of people with different racial backgrounds who are often left out of social, economic, and political domains.

Various literature on the Munda community provides diverse opinions regarding their origins, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and rights. According to the HRCBM Report<sup>4</sup>, the Munda came to East Bengal from different districts of West Bengal, including Jharkhand, Bakura, Purulia, Birbhum, and Medinipur. According to another source, Mundas are mainly defined as a part of Nagpur's Dravid group, who are close to Hom and Saontal and are part of the Colarian class from linguistic origin.<sup>5</sup> Khalequzzaman<sup>6</sup>, in this aspect, mentioned that in Nagpur, Mundas are mainly farmers and agriculture is their primary source of livelihood. Although it is difficult to assess their actual numbers, a study conducted by Mesbah Kamal mentioned that approximately 25,000 Munda people live in different parts of Bangladesh. It is also evident from other literature that in two upazilas (Koyra and Dumuria) of Khulna district, and three upazilas of Satkhira district, approximately 1163 Munda families have been living for a long time.<sup>7</sup> They are hardworking and self-dependent in their work. Like all other ethnic minority groups in India, they lived in rural areas for hundreds of years. However, they lost their lands about two hundred years ago, in circumstances shaped by the historical context of British colonial rule.

There is a significant body of literature that has examined the vulnerabilities of ethnic communities from various means.<sup>8</sup> Previous Studies on ethnic minorities in Bangladesh highlighted the issues of identity crises, conflict over resources, access to rights, and justice are quite well articulated.<sup>9</sup> However, the study on the Munda community is very scant and mostly focuses on their vulnerabilities<sup>10</sup>, adaptation practices<sup>11</sup>, resilience<sup>12</sup>, and forest resource usage patterns.<sup>13</sup> Although there is a relationship between vulnerability, adaptation, resilience, and human security in the existing literature<sup>14</sup>, yet, there are very few in-depth studies examining their insecurities and the strategies they employ to ensure security

both at the individual and community levels. The concept of human security, which evolved from the Club of Rome Group in the 1970s, denotes the absence of threats or risks or being deprived. The United Nations (UN) defines the term as a vulnerable person who is experiencing extreme poverty and marginalisation, affected by conflict, or struggling to survive a natural disaster.<sup>15</sup> The Human Security Unit of the UN has identified three basic components to understand the security condition of a person: Freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom from indignity.<sup>16</sup> However, the nature and intensity of these experiences are not actually the same and differ by gender. Consequently, they adopt different strategies to manage and ensure their security.

### **Gender and Security in Climate-Stressed Conditions: Framing a Connection**

In contemporary discourse, gender-related approaches and theories within the disciplines of Gender and Security Studies have emerged as indispensable tools to comprehend security dynamics in climate-stressed conditions.<sup>17</sup> The integration of the term 'gender' with the discussion of security dynamics in climate-induced stress has sometimes been the subject of contested issues, but these have not received enough attention among scholars and policy analysts.<sup>18</sup> It is observed that in the lexicon of security, non-traditional dimensions have been a reference point since they are predominantly connected with the security of individuals. The pivotal moment in the security discourse took place in 1941 when President Roosevelt described the term from four lenses: freedom from speech and expression, freedom of worship to God, freedom from fear, and freedom from want, and this analysis has widened the scope of security beyond the traditional military and state-centric paradigm.<sup>19</sup> In the 1980s, Amartya Sen critically examined human security linking with various economic, social, political, and developmental facets, and this seminal work was regarded as the groundwork to understand security in a comprehensive manner.<sup>20</sup> The term again resurfaced in the Human Development Report (1994), wherein sev-

en-dimensional aspects such as economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security were brought in under the two overarching concerns of 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want'.<sup>21</sup> Further refinement of the idea emerged when, in the 2010 Human Security Report, the term was succinctly defined, encompassing the notions of freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from dignity. Another pivotal articulation is the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 66/290, which delineates human security as "an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood, and dignity of their people," and this Resolution reinforced the need to adopt an inclusive approach to security.<sup>22</sup>

Within the discourse of gender and security, a fundamental question then persists: security for what and security for whom? Notably, security has a gender perspective since both men and women occupy distinct roles in times of crisis. Critics, including the proponents of liberal, social, and cultural feminists of major theories, brought in the issues of 'development' through the lens of women's participation, and gender-focused development initiatives.<sup>23</sup> Central to this discourse is that security can be ensured when women have the opportunity to contribute to the economy in an efficient manner.<sup>24</sup> More precisely, they prioritise development with the ideas of curbing discrimination and inequality and creating access to opportunity for all.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the integration of a gender-focused approach in the planning process is considered instrumental in addressing the economic and social concerns inherent in the development trajectory.

Again, then, in the gender and human security lexicons, the latter is considered from a holistic lens that encompasses various social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors. This comprehensive approach is expected to yield positive implications for both men and women who find themselves marginalised and vulnerable within societies. Under the rubrics of women and crisis management, Moser delineates five approaches

to understand the gradual evolution of the concept: welfare, antipoverty, equity, efficiency, and empowerment.<sup>26</sup> Empowering women, particularly through ensuring their access to and control over resources, stands as a paramount and ongoing agenda within the framework of Women in Development (WID). The United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) defines empowerment as 'the process by which women take control over their lives, acquiring the ability to make strategic choices'.<sup>27</sup> One prominent conceptualisation of empowerment is provided by Kabeer, who defined the term based on three interrelated dimensions such as access to material and social resources; the ability to set goals and act accordingly; and achieve particular goals.<sup>28</sup> The concept is perceived both as a process and an outcome emphasising women's capacity to make a decision and exercise freedom.<sup>29</sup> Mark, in this aspect, argues that the idea of women's empowerment varies across different social, economic, and cultural contexts.<sup>30</sup> To be exact, given the environment with context-specific barriers, women are empowered when they can decide their own choices and priorities.

Now, for this paper, the intricate interplay of gender, security, and climate change is examined within the context of the Munda community living in Satkhira district. Here, security is approached or interpreted from a gender perspective, recognising that the threat disproportionately impacts women. The paper endeavours to address the nature of threats and factors contributing to the sense of insecurity within the community. Here, climate change stands as a pivotal factor for the community since the threat has multiplied due to erratic weather patterns.<sup>31</sup> For a comprehensive understanding, the paper has added three basic components of human security: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from dignity. Moreover, to meet the specific requirement of the community, an additional component, freedom from vulnerability, is being introduced. Within this framework, vulnerability is delineated as being influenced by an individual's socioeconomic position, physical location, and the

extent of political marginalisation. The subsequent analysis presented in Figure 1 shows gender-based security considerations for the Munda community, encompassing a spectrum of threats that they have been facing in their everyday lives stemming from recurrent floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters. It also refers to equal opportunities for men and women since inequality catalyses heightened insecurity. The paper also posits that if women's security is bolstered alongside men, the overall resilience of the community can be strengthened.

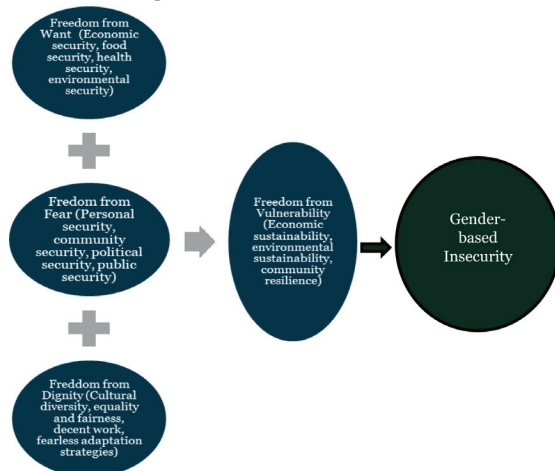


Fig. 1: Nexus between Gender and Security in Climate-stressed Conditions<sup>32</sup>

### Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature, as the insecurity of the Munda community has never been explored earlier in the study based on Satkhira, Bangladesh. There are lots of studies that deal with the vulnerabilities and rights of the Munda community. The study has followed the qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis. Therefore, this research on the Munda community is pioneering. Both primary and secondary data have been collected for this purpose. Three communities have been selected for the primary data collection based on the reconnaissance survey conducted in December 2023. Gabura, Burigoalini, and Garag Bazar of Shyamnagar, Satkhira, were selected as the study areas considering their climate vulnerabilities for primary data collection (Figure 2).

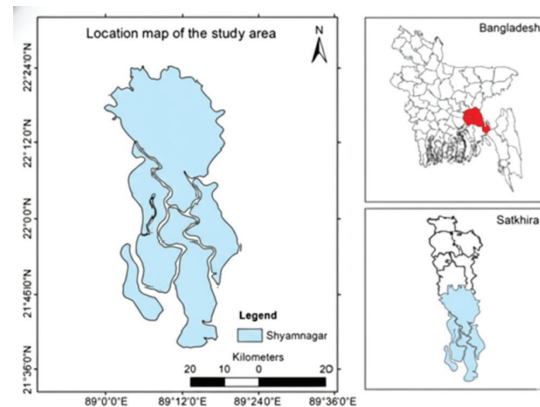


Fig. 2: Location of the Study Area<sup>33</sup>

The three study areas are unique from one another. The following is a short description of the study areas:

**Garage Bazar:** The Munda community is dependent on agricultural activities and is surrounded by other communities. Some of them are seasonal workers and are hired for brick fields and agricultural fields as day labourer. They are more progressive than the other Mundas in that region.

**Burigoalini:** This area is locally named Hajeer Hulo. This community is solely dependent on the Sundarbans. They collect firewood and fish from the Sundarbans. This community has no land of its own. One of the influential people in that area encourages them to stay there. Over the generations, they work as labour for the community leader.

**Gabura:** This area is the most vulnerable to climate change impacts because of its position. It is situated in the southern part of Satkhira and has to face each disaster that passes through the southwestern part of Bangladesh. Mundas are the minority, and intercommunal stress is also prevalent, along with the climatic risks.

The total number of in-depth interviews with Munda men and women was twenty, and interviews were conducted separately to understand their gender-based insecurities and strategies to minimise the risks at the individual level. The interviews were conducted by the guiding questionnaire tested during the reconnaissance survey. The data were collected from 18-21 January 24

until the information was saturated with repetitive information from the Munda community. A total of six focus groups were conducted for men and women separately in three study areas to understand their security strategies at the community level. Besides these, key informant interviews were conducted with local Munda leaders, school teachers, religious leaders, community workers, and students to understand the perceptions of the Munda community by the surrounding communities. These elements are important for finding out their insecurities in a holistic manner. Secondary information has been collected from relevant academic journal articles, books, newspapers, reports, and websites to formulate or synthesise conceptual understanding with the findings of the field. The information collected from the field was transcribed and grouped into categories according to the conceptual framework. After that, the data were analysed and related to the broader theoretical perspective. After drafting the article, the research team organised a knowledge dissemination session with the local stakeholders on 18 May 2024. The study findings have been shared with the community to validate the information and fulfill the ethical obligation of giving back the knowledge achieved through the research process.

## Results and Discussion

### Factors Augmenting Gender-based Insecurity:

Among the Munda community, different kinds of factors contribute to insecurity, ranging from personal security to community security. The following are certain issues that create concern among the community members-

**Freedom from Want:** The freedom from want of the Munda community encompasses certain aspects of income, education, livelihoods, health, and overall environmental situations. The Munda face significant challenges linked to low literacy rates and income, which are crucial determinants of ensuring job security. Very few people can read and write, as evidenced by 27 families living in Gabura. Due to the absence of higher secondary school facilities, many youths are compelled to seek employment in labor-intensive sectors in

the brick fields, construction, and other low-paid jobs. In Gabura, it was also revealed that children could not go to school due to adverse weather conditions, especially during floods and rainy seasons. As the roads become slippery, it impedes children's ability to travel to school. As a result, the illiteracy rates are high, which exacerbates economic vulnerabilities and limits the opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Minan Kumar Munda (23), a student at Barisal University, illuminated that:

*"I am the sole person who pursued higher education in Gabura Thana. As a male, I have some degree of facilities compared to females in the community. However, I have to cross a hardship to complete my education since high school is 6-7 miles away and we don't have financial solvency. During the rainy season, it is hard to go because of muddy and slippery roads that heighten the challenges of accessing education."*

The adverse consequences of limited educational opportunities have largely impacted female children since they are often forced a marriage at an early stage. Sheuli, an 18-year-old girl living in Gabura, informed that, *"I completed SSC, but cannot pursue further study due to the absence of a college in the vicinity. We have only two primary schools and one secondary school, which are insufficient to fulfill the aspirations of young girls. Girls are interested in going to school, but the dropout rate of female students has become high following COVID-19."*

Tragically, early marriage leads to the deaths of many adolescent mothers during childbirth at such tender ages of 13-14. Superstitious beliefs quite often deter individuals from going to the hospital. As remarked by Father Luigi, who has been serving them for around 25 years, eloquently explained, the detrimental impacts of early marriage:

*"Extreme poverty and entrenched harmful customs are extreme among the Munda community. A prevalent belief among them is that the first child is killed by malevolent spirits during childbirth. The plight of the lower caste within the community is dire. Overall, they are characterised as 'Buno', which belong to a 'discarded society.'"*

The livelihoods of the Munda community of Gabura Thana are intricately intertwined with the ecology of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest. Many rely on traditional practices such as catching shrimp and collecting honey and firewood for their subsistence. In contrast, those who live in Garage Bazar and Datinakhali are predominantly dependent on agricultural activities on lands owned by local landlords. Moreover, they sometimes supplement their income by collecting forest resources, a practice facilitated by local businessmen.

As also found, collecting shrimp is the primary source of income for the Munda people now, who have undergone a significant shift in their traditional adaptation pattern and livelihood strategies. This transition has resulted in a reduction in grazing land available for cultivation, consequently limiting agricultural activities in those areas. As informed by Kanika Munda (26), Datinakhali:

*“Local people are now focusing on shrimp cultivation, and everything is centred around this economic activity. This has resulted in adverse environmental consequences, including the depletion of fish varieties. Earlier, we found different types of local fish, but many fish varieties are now in decline because of excessive chemical fertilisers. Poisonous fish is available in the local market. Due to the presence of shrimp gherms, the fertility of the soil is reduced, which further impacts the agricultural sector adversely. It is a fact that we are now temporary beneficiaries, but I presume after 30-40 years, no cultivation would be possible here.”*

Moreover, shrimp cultivation has intensified a host of health hazards to the Munda community, including skin diseases and afflictions characterised by burning sensations on hands and legs. Usually, Mundas go to the village practitioners, and they also believe in tantrik treatments, considering health care provision in hospitals is a matter of financial burden to them. The availability of healthcare facilities in government clinics is poor, especially in Gabura. Pregnant women in this area are in a dire situation since they have to come to Shamnagar for treatment. As Subahu Mandal (70) lamented:

*“We have government clinics, but there are no certified doctors. Moreover, the healthcare infrastructure is inadequate. It takes a minimum of two hours by troller and 40 minutes by Honda. Overall, it is hard to recover the patient as evidenced by recent incidents in Gabura that identify the critical need for improved healthcare provision.”*

**Freedom from Fear:** Ensuring personal security is a significant concern for Munda people. It is revealed from the field sites that men and women in the Munda community face distinct forms of vulnerability due to gender roles and societal norms. Landlessness, along with personal land rights, is a matter of critical factor that bears historical significance for the Munda people, dating back to the British recognition of them as Serders in the initial land survey. Due to the communal land tenure system, the individual Munda precludes claiming land rights for generations despite the ample land for cultivation. In specific instances like Datinakhali, one of the local landlords named Mohshin invited them by giving assurances that he would allocate five bighas of land per family upon clearing the jungle. But later on, he broke the promise, which exacerbated the plight of the Munda. It was also found in other studies that taking such benefits, local people encroached upon their lands with false documents, which compounded their struggles for rightful ownership.

The Munda are now voters of the country, and they can participate in the electoral process. This has opened legal avenues for them, and they quite often file cases in lower judicial courts. However, being a marginalised ethnic minority group, their voices go unheard to a certain level, leading to an overarching identity crisis. Notably, among them, gender disparities persist, and females lag in terms of getting social recognition and land rights, amplifying their socioeconomic challenges. It is also revealed from the findings that around half a century ago, the Munda had abundant land resources with no discernible divisions of land rights between genders. However, over time, access to land witnessed a gradual reduction attributed to certain crucial factors such as limited

education, acute poverty, and lack of awareness. In 2022, a notable conflict emerged between the two groups over the grabbing of leased land. The confrontation reached a tragic extent when one opposing group hired nearly 200 people, resulting in the loss of a Munda's life. Some members of the Munda community expressed their sentiment in FGD that, due to extreme muscle power of the opposition party, they do not receive proper justice in the legal adjudication process.

The over-dependency of the Munda community on forest resources has intensified due to the limited ownership of agricultural land. Traditionally, the Mundas' forefathers were engaged in certain activities centered on the forest, including the clearance of forest, cutting firewood, and collecting honey to sustain their livelihoods. To halt forest resource depletion, the government has recently restricted the movements of local people in forest areas, and to traverse those areas, they are obliged to collect a pass costing nearly BDT600. This regulatory measure has compounded the financial burden of the Munda community and restricted their abilities. As explained by Minan Kumar Munda (24): *"We no longer have viable arable land for cultivation and have faced the restriction of accessing forest resources. Now, where do we turn from here since we don't have alternative livelihood skills?"*

The prevalence of fear is attributed, in part, to the pervasive issue of unemployment, which is common among the Munda community. There is a limited number of non-government organisations (NGOs) that exclusively work for the welfare of the Munda community. Hence, the outreach remains insufficient to address comprehensive needs. A notable portion of Munda is involved in handicrafts, while some of them opt for migration to Dhaka to seek job opportunities predominantly in the garment industry and brickfields. Due to the dearth of viable job opportunities, Munda people are compelled to collect forest resources. However, quite often, they have to face prevalent threats of piracy in the deep jungle, which forces them to give some payment as bribes. Besides, the fear of wildlife such as snakes and tigers has

added further concerns about personal safety and security. During winter, there are instances of tiger incursions at the locality for food, and this incident is notably found in Datinakhali.

The significance of political security is unequivocally paramount while considering other fundamental securities, such as access to food and water. During the rainy season, the Munda community faces unbearable challenges due to inadequate management of rainwater. Although some local NGOs have taken substantial initiatives to address this concern, they often face predicaments due to the presence of local political dynamics. As articulated by one of the NGO staff (26):

*"We have undertaken several initiatives aimed at canal excavation, but our efforts have been hindered by a series of political and internal barriers. Government lands are encroached upon gradually by the local musclemen, and we feel helpless to intervene efficiently. Sometimes, savers of canals work as grabbers, which adversely affects everyone living in the locality."*

This was reflected when a fire broke out in the Sundarbans. It is alleged that business entities and local figures with vested interests are involved in igniting fires as a means of expanding market activities. This sentiment was echoed by a local Journalist (25) who remarked:

Every time, a fire at specific locations within the Sundarbans raises suspicion. This indicates that some influential groups are potentially involved that seek to expand the fish farming enclosures (*Ghers*) to preserve their personal profits.

The Mundas are observed to be underrepresented in local political activities, thereby experiencing a clear disparity in accessing numerous facilities and services. One notable example of the politics of voting is extreme here. Research findings derived from expert interviews indicate that those who are relatively in an advantageous position among the Munda and actively support local representatives are more likely to receive favourable treatment in terms of getting access to services. As said by one of the local experts (33):

*"The allocation of resources for the Munda is disbursed as per the likelihood of garnering electoral support. Vote-centric political dynamics are everywhere in the locality. Accordingly, essential provisions such as electricity infrastructure and road construction projects are allocated for the Munda populace."*

**Freedom from Dignity:** The Munda have maintained a unique cultural identity for more than two centuries, but their socio-economic conditions have not changed much over time. Their distinct traditions, values, culture, religious beliefs (Sarna), language, culinary practices, customs, and rituals have made them different from mainstream groups. Distinct from the typical society, their ethno-cultural identity is in crisis now because of assimilation with the dominant local culture. The Munda communicate through two separate languages named Nagri and Mundari. Although they have a unique linguistic heritage, there is no written script. The absence of standardised written script and the lack of initiatives for the preservation of languages result in their gradual erosion.

Coupled with this, the identity crisis poses another challenge for the Munda community. A great debate persists among the local communities over their classification as an Indigenous community. Father Luigi gave his insights into this discourse:

*"The Munda are not identified as an Indigenous community since their origins do not lie within the country. Instead, those who trace their roots in the place of origin can be considered indigenous. Since the Munda have a distinct migratory history, they can be recognised as a small ethnic minority group."*

Thus, due to different belief systems, adjusting to and integrating with local people has been another issue of concern for the Munda community. It is even harder to bridge the gaps among various religious groups, which have been living there for centuries. Since Muslims comprise the majority, the Munda have to adjust to the dominant culture and beliefs. As informed by Sumita Mundal (26):

*"...the assertion that there is no societal beauty if there is no amalgamation of 12 diverse groups in the locality. While hosting an event, we invite neighbours from the mainstream and prepare food separately to foster unity. Nowadays, they gladly join us, which was less seen before. For us, all are equal in the evolving social dynamics, regardless of political affiliation. Being a minority group, we deeply value inclusivity and justice in every sphere."*

About the hierarchical social dynamics, Father Luigi has linked them metaphorically and illustrated:

*"...it is often said that the big fish naturally swallow the small ones. Within the hierarchically stratified society, inherent disparities are seen in the case of exercising power and other privileges. Due to these systematic challenges and societal injustice, Mundas are delineated as a 'defeated society'."*

Aside from the above, gender inequality is pervasive across multiple facets, notably seen in certain sectors like decision-making, educational access, income distribution, and the provision of equal opportunities. Similar to another study, it is found that wage disparity is prevalent, especially in Gabura, where a female day labourer gets BDT300, whereas their male counterparts get BDT400 per day.<sup>34</sup> There is a prevailing occupational segregation wherein women rarely go to work in the forest alone, but rather are predominantly engaged in rearing livestock and horticulture. These gendered divisions within the workforce perpetuate cycles of marginalisation and economic deprivation in society. Females are also refused to take microcredit by the local organisations since they have no noteworthy assets that can guarantee the repayment of loans.<sup>35</sup>

Findings gleaned from the two FGDs show that there is a prevailing dearth of leadership within the Munda community, coupled with psychological backwardness, which makes them far behind the societal mainstream. Although the Munda are given priority due to their honesty in any big project initiated in the locality, the absence of effective leadership emerges as a formidable barrier to the community's advancement. Remarkably, of 1000-1500 Mundas, the number of educated peo-

ple is striking, with 3-4 individuals being found educated. As said by the UP member (35):

*“The Munda community faces modernisation challenges; hence, their voices remain unheard, which inhibits their leadership opportunity. Many are hesitant and fear coming forward, despite creating some good opportunities for them. Since they could not represent themselves properly, a discrepancy is seen in terms of labour contributions and corresponding remuneration.”*

**Freedom from Vulnerability:** From the discussion of the above three components (freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom from dignity) in the context of the climatic situations of the Munda community, it needs to be argued that these parameters increase their overall vulnerabilities. The vulnerabilities stemming from adverse climatic conditions are acute in the Shatkhira district, and it was found in another study as well.<sup>36</sup> In particular, during the months of summer, the area grapples with hot and humid weather that is unbearable for the local inhabitants. One particular concern is that the Mundas have poor preparedness for disaster management, which makes them susceptible to the impacts of adverse environmental changes. During the months of *Chaitra and Baishakh*, the escalation of salt content in the water was so high that it posed a formidable challenge to agricultural productivity, particularly the cultivation of essential crops and vegetables. The presence of salinity in water hinders traditional agricultural practices and prompts a shift toward fish cultivation as a more suitable livelihood option, making crop production harder than fishing. As articulated by Anjali Rani Munda (27):

*“Throughout the year, we try to engage in rice and vegetable production. However, the persistent prevalence of salinity undermines the efforts of crop production. Salinity has a deleterious effect on agricultural productivity.”*

Since people are not aware of environmental conservation practices, they pollute soil and water, which has adverse consequences on the ecological equilibrium. The disposal of plastic into water bodies exacerbates damage to the environment.

This environmental change has a direct impact on accessing pure drinking water. During the summer seasons, it is hard to get potable water due to heightened salinity levels and limited waterway access. Communities have to travel considerable distances of 5-6 km in the early hours to collect drinking water, which indicates the acute nature of water scarcity in the areas. The inundation of embankments results in the sudden onset of flood risks, further complicating the challenges of communities. Due to floods, the Munda have to relocate temporarily to shelter houses for extended hours, which is a hardship for them. During catastrophic events such as Cyclone Aila, flood water reached up to five feet in Datinakhali, Gabura, and other low-lying regions, which breached the walls of traditional mud houses. In an FGD, both Tuku Rani (28) and Shumita Mondal (26) agreed that in the wake of such calamities, they have to rely heavily on relief aid, which is indispensable for sustenance and often falls short of meeting the requirements of vulnerable families. Since everywhere is surrounded by water, both males and females used to catch fish.

The housing of the Munda is near the bank of the river, especially for those who live in the vicinity of the Sundarbans. The combined effect of COVID-19 and Cyclone Amphan accelerated both environmental and food insecurity among the Munda inhabitants. During any disaster, women used to face more livelihood uncertainty than men. Since women have to take care of the livestock and their children, they cannot go far away to search for alternative livelihoods. Males used to migrate to Barisal and Gopalganj for rice cultivation and brickfields. In sum, environmental degradation, water scarcity, and climate change underscore the need for holistic mitigation strategies and sustainable development initiatives to safeguard the welfare of Munda communities.

### **Resilience Strategies in Climate-Stressed Conditions**

The Munda community is one of the least-known ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh. While living in the coastal region of the country, they have

to face various climate-stressed conditions. Apart from natural climatic conditions, Mundas have to face man-made climate-induced challenges. Among the climate-induced problems, salinity intrusion is the biggest challenge for them, which directly affects their lives and livelihoods. Respondents of an FGD<sup>37</sup> informed that farming is their main source of livelihood. However, due to salinity intrusion and other causes, they can only produce rice twice a year, which is not enough to support their families all year round. As mentioned earlier, the people of the Munda community lost their land rights for various reasons, and they work as marginal farmers on other people's land. However, due to cumulative salinity intrusion, those opportunities are also gradually shrinking. And for a certain period of the year, they remain unemployed, making it difficult to support their families. Consequently, they are forced to resort to an alternative job.

In most cases, male members of the community take jobs in Brick Kilns. In the process, they migrate to a different part of the country, leaving behind their female counterparts and children for three to six months. In both FGDs and individual interviews, respondents mentioned that this has given rise to numerous problems. When the males leave their homes, they are to take loans to buy groceries and other necessary things. Usually, their source of borrowing money is local *Mahajans* or NGOs who lend them at a high interest rate. Within a few months, they require more loans to support their families. Later on, it becomes a challenge for them to repay their loans. In this complex situation, the female members of the family become involved in various jobs, both at home and outside. Since salinity is a big concern in the region adjacent to the Sundarbans, it is an arduous task for Munda women to fetch fresh drinking water to meet their daily needs.

The Munda community living adjacent to the Sundarbans faces additional hardships. particularly, those living in Datinakhali and Gabura. Their heavy dependence on honey collection and small-scale fish and crabs from rivers exposes them to significant risks, including crocodile and

tiger attacks. They do not have land; hence, they have to rely on nature for their lives and livelihoods. Access to fresh water is limited; hence, women of the community have to work hard to fetch water for drinking and cooking. However, various local and international NGOs are working to mitigate climate change's impact on them. Among all, some local NGOs such as Caritas, Islamic Relief, BARCIK, CDO, CNRS, World Vision, PRERONA, Uttaran, BRAC, ASHA, Jagoroni, and Shushilan are noteworthy, which have come up with various projects to empower women and address their vulnerabilities.

### **Empowering the Munda: Probable Approaches**

From the discussion above, it is evident that Munda's resilience strategies are not enough to address day-to-day suffering, and there needs to be a comprehensive approach to mitigate the problems. Primarily, empowering the Munda community necessitates multiple forms of security initiatives while strengthening resilient practices. Although their sufferings know no bounds, it is evident that if they are provided with minimal opportunities, the individuals from the Munda community will be capable of flourishing their hidden talents. For example, several Munda girls have become members of the Bangladesh national girls' football team. This has demonstrated that the Munda community has numerous positive attributes which have been increasingly recognised by mainstream society. To address their challenges and ensure their basic rights, both the government, NGOs, as well as civil society need to come forward with certain mitigation strategies and sustainable development initiatives as suggested below.

First and foremost, livelihood diversification is central to economic empowerment. Specific agencies such as the government (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Livestock) and NGOs (e.g., BRAC) can work together to create alternative income sources. They can include climate-resilient agriculture, microfinance, and cooperative funding to enhance economic opportunities for the Munda community.

Second, agricultural forestry, soil conservation initiatives, and water management can be promoted to ensure sustainable land use, biodiversity preservation, and protect overall natural resources. Climate-adaptive measures (e.g., elevated houses, cyclone shelters, and natural buffer zones) and disaster preparedness (community training and climate education) can be strengthened in the coastal areas to reduce vulnerabilities to natural disasters. Simultaneously, doctors, primary healthcare centres, and maternal and child health programmes need to be expanded in those areas to get timely support during emergencies.

Third, to reduce marginalisation of the Munda community, the Ministry of Culture, along with the local government and NGOs, can work together. These agencies need to take active measures to preserve their language, culture, and traditions. To enhance social empowerment and cultural preservation, additional high schools and vocational training centres need to be set up, enabling the Munda to improve literacy and digital skills and access more job opportunities outside. Such centres can also support them in making independent decisions and social initiatives within their communities.

Fourth, ensuring representation is one of the key elements to empowerment. Representation in local councils and other policymaking bodies is pertinent for fostering meaningful participation. For securing land rights and overall resource management, the Ministry of Land and Forest Department can provide legal aid services over disputed land. In addition, laws against discrimination and land grabbing should be effectively enforced at the local levels to ensure legal protection and equality.

Lastly, the Munda community itself must engage with available opportunities and resources. When these push and pull factors function in harmony, the Munda community will likely achieve the dignified life they deserve in society. This approach, indeed, will pave the way for creating a just and inclusive society.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is an attempt to examine how ethnicity, gender, and security are interlinked in

climate-stressed situations. Based on the study on the Munda community living in the southern part of Bangladesh, the paper explores how they navigate life in some of the most climate-stressed areas, where various factors compound their challenges. Over time, they have lost their land rights, leaving them exposed to various natural hazards, including floods, salinity intrusion, storm surges, cyclones, and riverbank erosion. Now, their struggles are multifaceted: historically marginalised and deprived of their basic needs, and facing immense hardships for their day-to-day survival. Limited access to basic education makes their situation even more difficult, leaving many unaware of their socioeconomic, civil, as well as political rights. Women are more vulnerable than men due to restricted opportunities for doing jobs and education, social stigma, and a host of other. Based on the various forms of insecurities, the paper has established a link among four key dimensions of human security (freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom from dignity, and freedom from vulnerability). The primary data on upazilas of Shatkhira reveal that the Munda community requires various forms of resilient practices that are not sufficient to sustain their lives and livelihoods. Hence, the paper suggests a comprehensive approach is needed to ensure their social, economic, political, and environmental security. The paper also recommends that concerned ministries should collaborate with NGOs to address these insecurities. This will enable the Munda community to live a dignified and empowered life.

**Acknowledgment:** This paper was conducted based on the Australia Awards Alumni Support Grant scheme. The authors express their gratitude to the Australian Embassy in Bangladesh for their wholehearted logistical support.

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