

Why we need to hear the women of the hills



Dibarah Mahboob is filmmaker, artist, and visual anthropology postgraduate from Goldsmiths, University of London.

DIBARAH MAHBOOB

When we talk about Bangladesh’s water crisis, the discourse usually falls on the coastal belt, where salinity, sea-level rise, and water scarcity dominate headlines. Yet another crisis is quietly unfolding in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where long-running mountain streams are drying slowly but inexorably, pushing Indigenous communities deeper into precarity. This is not merely an environmental issue, but also a deeply gendered one.

Take Shishikkha Chakma from Bilaichhari. Her home lies a hill away from the nearest trickle of water. On a regular day, she makes the climb twice; when guests visit, it becomes six. The water she hauls is used strictly for cooking and drinking. To bathe or wash clothes, she must walk farther, facing multiple risks. “Most of our lands lie vacant,” says fellow villager Proshanto Chakma. “We don’t have enough water to cultivate.”

Across the three CHT districts of Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and Bandarban, women like Shishikkha begin their days with long, perilous, potentially hazardous treks. As the once-reliable streams fade to muddy trickles, the walks grow longer.

But these women are far from powerless. Indigenous communities, many of whom are matriarchs, have always practised adapting to climate change through ancestral knowledge. In Bandarban alone, more than 55 crop varieties and 289 medicinal or edible plants are cultivated using a deep understanding of altitude, soil, wind, and microclimates. This knowledge, passed down orally, has grown from the land itself. It is essential and invaluable.

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ecological caretakers, building bamboo check dams, harvesting rainwater, and relying on knowledge passed down through matriarchal lines, like reading tree canopies, bird calls, and forest signs to find hidden springs. They know which forest plants heal, which nourish. This deep ecological wisdom—relational, practical, and spiritual—is rarely acknowledged in climate fund discourses and development frameworks.

The water scarcity in CHT stems from decades of deforestation, ecological mismanagement, and the marginalisation of Indigenous land practices. Forests have been stripped relentlessly. Jhum cultivation, once grounded in sacred rotational cycles, has been compressed from 15-year intervals to just two or three, leaving the soil too degraded

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PHOTO: UNDP ARCHIVE

to recover. Where fallow periods once allowed land to heal, today’s intensification erodes topsoil and drains fertility.

The Asian Development Bank (2011) notes that CHT’s watershed degradation stems from deforestation, road construction, short-rotation jhum, and the cultivation of root crops like cassava and turmeric on steep slopes. Modifications of traditional practices have led to landslides, biodiversity loss, and diminished aquifer recharge. The International Soil Reference and Information Centre’s Global Assessment of Soil Degradation report (2006) identifies CHT soils as shallow, low in organic matter, and highly susceptible to erosion if forest cover is lost.

From my field visits, I realised another overlooked culprit is the unchecked spread of teak plantations. Touted for timber, these

non-native trees are poorly suited to the CHT’s ecology. They consume large amounts of water, crowd out native species, and do little to stabilise soil. Their oily, waxy leaves repel water, causing surface runoff rather than allowing it to seep into the ground. Ironically, many of these plantations were funded as “green” afforestation projects, equating monoculture with ecological health.

Where groves were once considered sacred and served as natural reservoirs, state-driven afforestation and market forestry have turned biodiverse systems into commercial monocultures. The result is cracked soils, silenced springs, and parched hillsides.

In Rangamati, only 63 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water. Deep wells, even when available, offer no certainty in a landscape shaped by landslides and erratic rainfall. Girls skip school, and

elders fall ill. Still, women continue to build clay-lined pots, shaded wells, bamboo spouts—quiet acts shaped by care and underlined by community resistance.

Before colonial forestry and market logic affected the hills, Indigenous cosmologies governed land use. Forests were sacred and responsive. Land was not measured by yield, but by relationship. Indigenous studies scholar Ranjan Datta documents how these ecologies of care were systematically eroded by brickfields, plantations, and NGO schemes that favoured output over reciprocity.

Still, many women remember. They remember *Bogle Puja* and *Hanei Puja*, where land and spirit were one. They remember that sustainability was never about metrics, but kinship. This knowledge lives on—in bodies, rituals, and the quiet, persistent tending of place and selves.

Historically, ecological governance in the CHT followed matrilineal rhythms. Women planted by the moon, made offerings before harvests, and treated land not as a resource, but as kin. Now, that balance is unravelling. Climate change accelerates displacement already driven by land grabs, militarised development, and the dismissal of Indigenous practice. Despite being frontline stewards, Indigenous women remain absent from forest and water governance. There is no systematic effort by the government to document and integrate Indigenous knowledge in any sector plan or biodiversity conservation planning.

While climate finance conversations increasingly include coastal women, hill women remain largely invisible within a system that does not recognise their ancestral kinship with the land.

To move forward, we must go beyond the convenient trope of resilience and focus on justice. Centring Indigenous women as knowledge holders, protectors, and leaders—not simply as token guest speakers—is a start. Their governance systems, rooted in reciprocity, offer models of survival we can no longer afford to ignore.

As Datta reminds us, sustainability without justice is abandonment. The drying streams are not just symptoms of climate collapse; they are signs of what we’ve been apathetic to.

What UNOC3 portends for future ocean governance



Dr. Mizan R. Khan is technical lead at LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC).

MIZAN R KHAN

The third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3), co-hosted by France and Costa Rica, convened in Nice from June 9 to 13 this year. Attended by more than 60 heads of state and government, the conference sought to build on the outcomes of the preceding UNOCs held in New York in 2017 and Lisbon in 2022, and to accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas, and marine resources.

UNOC3 concluded with the adoption of the Nice Ocean Action Plan, a two-part outcome comprising a political declaration and hundreds of voluntary commitments from both state and non-state actors. The conference centred on three key priorities: finalising the declaration and action plan, mobilising financial resources, and advancing the ratification of the High Seas Treaty (HST)—formally the agreement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). This treaty, open for signature since September 2023, represents a landmark attempt to govern more than half the planet’s surface—areas beyond national jurisdiction that remain largely unregulated.

The declaration, titled “Our Ocean, Our Future: United for Urgent Action,” reflects growing alarm over the accelerating loss of marine biodiversity, marine pollution, resource depletion, and the impact of climate change on ocean health. It calls for transformative action and acknowledges the ocean’s interdependence with other multilateral environmental regimes, particularly those on climate and biodiversity. It reaffirms the global commitment to a legally binding agreement on plastic pollution and reiterates the “30x30” pledge—to conserve 30 percent of the planet’s land and marine areas by 2030.

Despite these commitments, reality remains sobering. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its special report on oceans and the cryosphere, issued dire warnings on the deteriorating

state of ocean health. Yet, little has changed. Only 2.7 percent of the ocean is currently safeguarded from unsustainable extraction. In Europe, a World Wildlife Fund report reveals that just two percent of marine waters are under active management, despite 11 percent being officially designated for protection. Many observers have described these commitments as little more than political box-ticking. Monitoring and enforcing agreements across the fluid, expansive domain of the high seas remains a formidable challenge.

SDG 14 is also among the

Covering over 60 percent of the world’s oceans, the HST will only enter into force once 60 countries ratify it. So far, more than 50 countries have done so, including 19 during the conference itself. However, several key maritime powers—Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, South Africa, and the UK—have yet to ratify. The US signed the treaty in September 2023 but is unlikely to ratify it, having never ratified UNCLOS, the parent convention. This lack of participation by major powers raises questions about the treaty’s future enforcement and legitimacy.

least funded of all SDGs. The UN estimates that implementing major ocean-related initiatives will require \$175 billion annually over the next five years. So far, only around \$10 billion has been pledged. At the conference, the European Commission committed one billion pounds to ocean conservation, sustainable fisheries, and marine science. Germany announced a 100-million-pound initiative to clear underwater munitions in the Baltic and North seas. New Zealand pledged \$52 million to strengthen ocean governance in the Pacific. In a move towards innovative financing, Indonesia and the World Bank introduced a Coral Bond to support reef conservation, while the Bloomberg Ocean Initiative pledged support for establishing a secretariat to help implement marine protected areas (MPAs) under the HST.

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For small island developing states, which face the greatest threat from ocean degradation, the treaty’s swift implementation is vital.

The HST establishes, for the first time, a legal mechanism to create marine protected areas in international waters and impose restrictions on destructive practices such as deep-sea mining and geoengineering. Yet, this governance remains patchy. The International Seabed Authority (ISA), tasked with regulating seabed mining since UNCLOS entered into force in 1994,

has struggled to establish effective oversight. Debate continues over whether a global moratorium on deep-sea mining is necessary. Already, 36 countries including both UNOC3 co-hosts have called for such a moratorium. Surprisingly, the declaration itself made no mention of this issue. Delegates expressed concern over recent US moves to bypass the ISA and directly issue permits to companies seeking to extract strategic metals, such as copper, nickel and cobalt, from international waters.

In April, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order calling deep-sea mining “the next gold rush,” prompting warnings from the UN secretary-general that the deep sea cannot be allowed to become a new “Wild West.” The ISA is expected to address the issue at its upcoming session.

Two deeper concerns ran through the discussions in Nice: the acute funding shortfall for environmental protection and the growing

fragility of multilateralism. Funding for multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) has stagnated, as evidenced in climate and biodiversity negotiations. The experience in Nice was no different. The US withdrawal from global environmental leadership, alongside the downsizing of USAID and recent aid cuts from several European governments, suggests that the international funding landscape will

remain challenging. The absence of the US from key multilateral initiatives is likely to cast a long shadow over global efforts to protect the oceans.

For Bangladesh, a maritime nation with significant interests in ocean governance, the stakes are high. The country ratified the High Seas Treaty in September 2024 and has initiated several national marine policies and institutional reforms. Oceanography

departments have opened in universities, and the Bangladesh Navy has established a dedicated Maritime University. At the Nice conference, China’s vice-president offered support for building marine research and skills in developing countries. Bangladesh should seize this opportunity by establishing a bilateral partnership with China to strengthen its marine science and governance capacities.

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