

THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN IN DISASTERS

by Annemarie Gerbrandy

In the cyclone of April 1991, an estimated 138,000 people died, 85% of them being children and adult women. Looking at this disproportional rate, it is general. Women's so called "limited physical strength", children are the most vulnerable to disasters. Small children are not strong enough to fight against the violation of a cyclone, and also suffer more from the diarrhoeal diseases that often occur after a disaster. Children always need special care and protection, and this is even more so in times of disaster. But what makes adult women so vulnerable? Why did more women than men die during the 1991 cyclone?

What strikes me often during meetings and discussions on disaster related subjects, is the expression that "women are weak" and, therefore, "more vulnerable". Sure, for biological reasons women are physically less strong than men. But this does not prevent many women from being overloaded with responsibilities and tasks both in her family and in society. Within the family, she is responsible for the child bearing and rearing, and all other domestic duties. In addition, in present day Bangladesh, many women are economically active and contribute a great deal to the family income. This is true especially among the poor where poverty has forced increasing numbers of women to work outside the home. Because of these double duties, the "weaker sex" in general work longer hours than men.



Photo : Shehzad Noorani

more severe among women because they consume less food than men. Also, women get less health care and less education than men. Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where women's life expectancy is lower than for men. In culture and society, women are not treated equal to men because they are regarded as being of less value. It is this discrimination that actually

supposed to stay at home when her husband is away. Thus, in the 1991 cyclone, many women died because, despite the warnings, they did not leave their houses. They did not leave either because their husbands were not home, or because their husbands were reluctant to take them to such a public place as a shelter. Other women didn't leave their houses in time because in

life and property of people living in cyclone and storm surge prone areas has been prepared and are being sent to community level. A brochure is under preparation to help raise public awareness about disaster and its impacts.

Workshop at District and Thana Level

District workshops at four most disaster prone Coastal Districts, have been chalked out its programme of action. In the mean time, following measures have been implemented by the Bureau.

National Level

a) National Disaster Management Council headed by the Prime Minister has been established at the national level for policy decision and guidance. b) Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Co-ordination Committee has been set up to co-ordinate disaster-related activity of Ministries and its sub-ordinate officers to solve problems that may crop up at implementation stages.

Field Level

a) District Disaster Management Committee b) Thana Disaster management Committee c) Union Disaster Management Committee

The Deputy Commissioner, the Thana Nirbahi Officer and the Union Parishad Chairman have been acting respectively as the Chair person of these Committees. These field level Committees are being activated by field visits of DMB officials.

Preparation of Hazard Map

Disaster Management Bureau has already identified disaster prone areas and has prepared 9 kinds of maps which have been supplied to field level officers. These maps will help formulation and implementation of various counter-disaster measures.

Disaster Management Action Plan

Action plan for disaster management envisages advance planning and preparedness to meet any crisis or Disaster situation. Disaster Management Bureau has already prepared Model Action Plan for District, Thana and Union and has supplied it to all concerned to help them prepare their own action plan following given guidelines.

Publication of Booklet and Brochure

A booklet containing dos and don'ts before, during and after the disaster period to save

their absence robbery might take place. Furthermore, the care and responsibility for small children also made it difficult for them to leave. Then, several women who finally did leave their houses, were hindered by the sari, swollen and heavy because of the water that accompanied the cyclone. The vulnerability of women to disasters is recognized in many reports and documents. But the contention that "women are weak" cannot be accepted as a fact. On account of their role in child-bearing, child-rearing, home-making, and income generation, women have innate strength that should not make them vulnerable. What often makes and keeps them vulnerable is society and culture. Yet, the statement that "women are weak" is also typical for the way in which women are often addressed during disasters: as passive victims, not capable to cope by themselves. It is a commonly held perception that denies the capacities women could have, once they are given the opportunity.

(The author is program officer for disaster management with UNICEF - Bangladesh.)

they are "weak and vulnerable". If we really strive towards empowerment of the most vulnerable people, women should be at the center of any plan or program for disaster preparedness. They should be treated as important and equal actors, not as passive victims and receivers of relief. Women should participate in disaster management training, since they are the ones who need skills and knowledge in how to protect their lives and those of their children and families, how to treat or prevent diarrhoeal diseases, how to protect their property, and how to survive in the aftermath. They should participate in the development and implementation of disaster action plans because they know better than anyone else their specific needs, difficulties, and possibilities. They should have a say in preparedness measures and in relief and rehabilitation activities because they are the ones who have to cope with disasters.

(The author is program officer for disaster management with UNICEF - Bangladesh.)

U.S. MISSION STRATEGY FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS IN BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh is frequently hit by disasters, particularly cyclones, floods, and drought. The U.S. Mission strategy related to disaster assistance is to assist and encourage development efforts fostering a more dynamic economy and resilient institutions better able to withstand the effects of disasters when they occur. A disaster can eradicate years of development in a matter of minutes. Disaster preparedness measures and appropriate development policies can play a key role in protecting developmental progress by preventing disasters or mitigating their effects. The U.S. also considers humanitarian relief as integral to an overall strategy to achieve sustainable development. Appropriate relief measures coupled with development assistance programs can help not only to save lives and

alleviate suffering but also initiate the progress of rehabilitation and reconstruction and speed the return to normalcy. Disaster prevention, mitigation, and preparedness programs are vital components of the U.S. Government's worldwide humanitarian assistance strategy because they can sharply reduce the human impact and costs of disasters. In Bangladesh, the U.S. Mission directly supports preparedness activities and facilitates the provision of relief and rehabilitation assistance when a disaster causes damage and destruction which is beyond the country's capacity and resources.

When disaster strikes, the U.S. Mission gives priority to meeting essential human needs, such as emergency public health and distribution of relief supplies. The magnitude and types of assistance provided will depend on the seriousness and nature of the disaster, but there is usually a need to assist with the provision of clean water and control of diarrhoeal disease in the affected population. Severe disasters may also call for assistance with basic communications, logistics and transport, as was the case with Cyclone Marion in 1991. U.S. civilian and military response capability may be sought as appropriate. U.S. Mission efforts are usually not undertaken directly, but by working in coordination with the Government of Bangladesh, other donors and through a limited number of intermediaries or non-Governmental organisations that have previously demonstrated capabilities to undertake relief efforts.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief through DMB is updating standing orders for disaster. NGOs experienced in the area of disaster Management would supplement Government's efforts in disaster management. A control room works round the clock in this Ministry. Moreover, an organisation called Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) having 28,000 volunteers operate in the cyclone prone area and are also funded by this Ministry.

Cyclone Warning system is well developed in Bangladesh. Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief provides food, cloth, housing materials like C.I. sheet to meet temporary needs of people affected by Disasters.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief implements the several programme, as a supportive programme of disaster management. Food for Work (FFW) Programme has been introduced in the year 1974. The FFW programme generated roughly 106 million man-days of employment in 1992-93 while it would be 100 million in 1993-94. The works are:

i) Construction of bridges/ culverts. ii) Test Relief Programme. iii) Maintenance of rural roads and embankment. iv) VGD schemes.

The MDMR presently is executing several disaster related projects including a three years programme on Comprehensive disaster management. As is well known, disaster mitigation measures could not be taken due to limited resources.

However due priority should be given to disaster Mitigation Project so vitally needed for a disaster prone country like Bangladesh. In fact investment in disaster Mitigation Project will help us in sustainable development and preservation of environment.

It is now widely accepted world-wide that investment on Disaster Mitigation and Preparedness is investment on development.

It has been observed that better preparedness is more effective than other measures. This is apparent from the fact that loss of life

and property were less during May 2, cyclone 1994 compared to cyclone of 1991. Government through concerted efforts have also given adequate attention to counter the drought situation in northern part of Bangladesh. In our region of South Asia there exists a

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and evaluation of food related poverty alleviation measures with emphasis on vulnerable Group Development Institutional Feeding Programme and Road Maintenance Programme etc. g) Matters connected with distribution of relief supplies coming under relief agreements with foreign countries. h) Liaison with inter-national organisations relating to subjects allocated to this Ministry.

Disaster Management is a priority concern of the Government.

The institutional arrangements and procedures for dealing with natural disasters have developed over the years and have stood up remarkably well. In order to strengthen the Government's capability to Co-ordinate and monitor disaster related activities an organisation named "Disaster Management Bureau (DMB)" was established to assist the Ministry in carrying out its role as disaster focal point of the Government. The Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation (DRR) is another Department of the Ministry. It has field staff at the District (DRROs) and Thana Levels (PIOs). The name of the Ministry of Relief has been changed to

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islands" (Pakistan Observer dated 17th November 1970). Hatiya Island was the worst affected. It was swept by a wind of 150 miles per hour and a tidal wave of 20 ft height. The other worst affected areas were Swandip, Kutubdia, Boal-khali, Anowara, Bholia and Patuakhali.

It is estimated that between five to eight lakhs people died in November 1970 cyclone. The other damages are estimated as under. (Source: The Deadliest Tropical Cyclone in History, Frank and Hossain, 1971).

Commissioners of the districts of Barisal, Noakhali, Chittagong and Khulna were in Dhaka to attend a conference. "During a survey 280,000. Loss of poultry of the devastated area of 500,000. Houses damaged Swandip, Hatiya and its 400,000. Schools damaged adjoining char area various 3,500. Fishing boats officials and non-officials destroyed (Marine) 9,000. said that the misleading Fishing boats destroyed (in weather bulletin broadcast by land) 90,000.

the Radio confused the people of the coastal area who did not Question arises could these take any precautionary lives be saved and loss of properties minimised? Yes, fury that ravaged the off shore

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