

## 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 disproportionate rate, it is obvious that women and 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.

The important role women are playing in family and society, does not seem to be recognized if we look into the situation of women in general. Women's so called "limited physical strength", compared to that of men, cannot be legitimized by biological reasons. Social and cultural factors are underlying this situation. Malnutrition, for example, is

causes the comparative weakness and vulnerability of women. Social and cultural factors also contribute to the vulnerability of women in another way. Although, as mentioned above, more women are working outside their homes now than there were in the past, the movement of women is still restricted. A woman is



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

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.

An important component of disaster preparedness is empowerment of the people who are most vulnerable to disasters. Empowerment in the sense of enabling people to cope better with disasters. Thus, to empower people they need to be provided with skills and knowledge on how to cope with disasters. But empowerment means more than skills and knowledge, it also inhabits opportunities. It needs a change in the way of thinking, in attitudes. Women, as much as men and communities, should become aware of women's strength and unlearn that

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.

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## 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 diarrheal 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 organizations that have previously demonstrated capabilities to undertake relief efforts.

The U.S. Mission directly supports disaster preparedness activities of NGOs who continue to play a key role in relief efforts. The U.S. finances a disaster preparedness unit at CARE, which enables CARE to utilize the strong logistical system it has throughout the country, in part a direct result of the U.S. funded food for work and Integrated Food for Development projects. The U.S. also funds local

community training in disaster preparedness and coping mechanisms through the PACT private Rural Initiatives Project (PRIP) and funds a nutritional surveillance program focused on high risk-disaster prone areas implemented by Helen Keller International. The U.S. Mission also has pre-qualified a number of NGOs that have demonstrated capacity and expertise in undertaking relief activities. Completion of the pre-qualification process positions an NGO to receive U.S. disaster assistance funds and/or commodities during disaster response. The U.S. and the Bangladesh military also carry out joint training exercises that provide troops with experience in conducting air drops of relief supplies, rescue operations, and other disaster response activities.

To facilitate rapid response efforts when a disaster is declared, the U.S. Ambassador has a discretionary authority to provide up to \$25,000 for disaster relief without further approval from the office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) of the United States Agency for International Development, the U.S. Government entity responsible for worldwide U.S. disaster assistance. Although additional non-military resources can only be provided after formal request to and approval from OFDA, funding for disaster response efforts can be in place within days of the event. The U.S. Mission prefers to, if at all possible, restrict the importation of relief goods from outside Bangladesh, and favors the use of locally purchased goods as available.

Improving disaster preparedness is critical for a disaster prone country like Bangladesh. It is essential that Bangladesh continue to improve and institutionalize disaster preparedness at the central and local levels of Government. This is essential to ensure that disaster assistance efforts are, when required, carried out efficiently and effectively. The U.S. Government will continue to assist Bangladesh in improving its preparedness systems and response capabilities.

## Relief in Disaster Management

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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 Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief considering the role of the Ministry. Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh have also declared the Ministry as the focal point of all disaster related activities in Bangladesh.

In order to ensure proper policy Co-ordination prompt response and effective Co-ordination in all phases of Disaster Management the Government have formed the following committees:

a) National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) headed by Prime Minister. b) Inter-Ministerial Master Management Co-ordination Committee (IMDMCC) headed by the Minister-in-Charge of Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

c) Disaster Management Committees at District, Thana and Union level.

The Government is also giving emphasis on the IDNDR (International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction) activities. The following measures were taken in that respect:

i) A national IDNDR Committee was constituted with Minister-in-Charge, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief as Chairperson.

ii) District and Thana IDNDR Committee were also formed. The committees are actively perusing the IDNDR objectives.

Cyclone shelters are being

constructed in coastal areas. There are roughly about 600 cyclone shelters in the country. Government also plans to construct 2,500 cyclone shelters in phases. For better co-ordination of cyclone shelter programme a steering committee headed by the Ministry for Planning was constituted. Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief plays supportive role.

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 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 DDMR 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

## CYCLONE

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of Meteorology, Dhaka issued a note directing that signal numbers should be dropped from warnings issued through Radio and TV for the general public. Therefore the weather warnings on 12th November warned of the "Great Danger" but it appears that the public who were used to hear signal number 10 for "Great danger" did not take it seriously.

In the background stated above, the people of the coastal area and offshore islands were caught unprepared for the cyclone Cyclone in History. Frank disaster. The Deputy Commissioners of the districts of Barisal, Noakhali, Chittagong and Khulna were million. Crop loss \$ 63 in Dhaka to attend a million. Loss of cattle 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 take any precautionary measures to face the natural fury that ravaged the off shore

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, Bhola 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: islands were caught unprepared for the cyclone Cyclone in History. Frank disaster. The Deputy Commissioners of the districts of Barisal, Noakhali, Chittagong and Khulna were million. Crop loss \$ 63 in Dhaka to attend a million. Loss of cattle 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.

Question arises-could these lives be saved and loss of properties minimised? Yes, See Page 2

## Role and Responsibilities of DMB

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pre-disaster activities, both structural and non-structural, can reduce loss of life and property, so pre-disaster action planning can help Disaster Managers to respond quickly and effectively in post-disaster phase. Besides these, the Disaster Management Bureau will assist the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief in handling crisis situation with expert advice, when necessary.

Disaster management involves both structural and non-structural measures. Structural measures, such as construction of Cyclone/Flood Shelters, Embankments, Strong houses, Road Network etc. change the behaviour of disasters, while non-structural measures, such as awareness creation, disaster education, training etc. change impacts of Disaster. The Disaster Management Bureau has no or little involvement in the implementation of structural measures, which will be done by other organisations but the Bureau has the responsibility to report to the Government, from time to time, about the positions of such measures in the disaster prone areas and may recommend measures to improve this side of disaster management. Fore-casting and warning system is also connected with disaster management. But in Bangladesh, forecasting and warning system is considered inadequate and complex and hence common people do not understand it. DMB will keep constant touch with Meteorological Department to help them improve fore-casting and warning system and to make it more people oriented and understandable.

In Bangladesh, many NGOs, both national and international origin, work for community development programme and they are also taking up disaster management in their programme. The DMB is committed to co-operate with them in their disaster management programmes and also co-ordinate their activities, so that desired goal can be reached quickly. The help and assistance of private and sector is also very vital to

achieve the goal. Keeping in view above objectives and for discharging assigned responsibilities, the Disaster Management Bureau has been chalking 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't before, during and post-disaster period to save

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 completed with participation of people of different professions including elected representatives, so far, workshops at five Thana Headquarters have been completed. Thana level officials, public leaders, elected representatives, both male and female, representatives from teaching profession, Imams of mosques, and business community took part in these workshops. Many valuable suggestions/recommendations were received from people, who encountered some devastating disasters in life. These suggestions will help this Bureau to draw up its programme of future activities.

**Strengthening of Communication System**

In disaster management, communication system plays a vital role. So attempts are being made to connect all disaster prone Districts and Thanas with Dhaka and Thanas with Districts. So far 4 fax machines and 12 wireless sets have been installed at Disaster Prone Districts and existing old Radio Wireless sets are being shifted to most Disaster Prone Thanas. Procurement of 300 more Wireless sets is under process in the Ministry of Disaster management and Relief and when these sets will be available, all Thana Headquarters will be connected with Districts and Dhaka.

(a) Constitution of a Disaster Management Training Task Force - To create awareness about disasters, and its impacts and to teach people how to save life and property in the event of a disaster, an extensive training programme is being drawn up for selected leaders of community level.

(b) For community mobilisations step has been

taken up to create a group of dedicated trainers at District and Thana level. For this, trainers' training course is being arranged at Dhaka and at District and Thana level, to build up a group of efficient Trainers at different levels.

**Introduction of Disaster Management Modules in all Training Institutions of Bangladesh.**

Disaster Management Bureau requested all important Training Institutes of Bangladesh to introduce modules on disaster management in their training programme to acquaint all Government officials with new concept of disaster management. This has already been done.

**Data Bank**

To prepare any programme on disaster management, data of various kinds, on past disasters and disaster prone areas, are needed but these are not available in our country. Hence DMB has started developing a data bank or MIS, collecting data from various sources and preserving it with the help of Computers. Development of GIS will be considered in future.

**Updating of Standing Orders for Flood and Cyclone**

Standing orders for flood and cyclone were prepared long ago. These need modifications and updating to conform to the present conditions. DMB has under taken the task of up-dating and modifications of these standing orders, unifying both standing orders into one under title Standing Orders for Disasters. This will be finalised within a very short time.

**Training of officials of the Bureau**

DMB has chalked out an elaborate programme as per its project document to train its officials at home and abroad to make them competent to carry out assigned responsibilities. Donor organisations like UNDP, UNICEF and British ODA are helping DMB to train its officials. Already, five DMB officers have received Disaster Management Training at Cranfield (UK) and ADPC (Bangkok).

community level.

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