

# Addressing psychosocial disabilities in disaster management

SHAMSIN AHMED

RECENTLY, I came across a friend's Facebook status that read: "The rain is supposed to bring forth life from land, and comfort our stressful minds. Not flood our cities and villages, nor wash away homes and livelihood. What have we done? How poorly have we designed our world?" Nadine Shaanta Murshid, in her article published by *The Daily Star* on August 23, 2017, has rightly pointed out that "when we ascribe floods as 'natural disaster' we must ask ourselves how 'natural' the causes really are." And regardless of how "natural" or artificial the disasters are, there are some who suffer the consequences of a disaster more than others.

Here are some facts that have not been part of the mainstream discussion on disaster management:

As reported on the *Star Weekend*, April 21, 2017, the Rana Plaza accident killed over 1,100 people while many of the survivors suffered from psychosocial disabilities. Four years on, many of the 2,500 and more survivors still showcase symptoms of being unwell, according to counsellors working with Rana Plaza survivors and families of victims. The rehabilitation initiative taken up by some NGOs was perhaps the first of its kind to address disabilities in disaster management.

As we face another disaster in the form of a flood in northern Bangladesh, following onrush of water from the upstream and incessant rains, we must ask ourselves, how are those

with psychosocial disabilities coping with this disaster? Bangladesh has the highest natural disaster mortality rate in the world, with over half a million people lost to disaster since the 1970s. Most of these people have died during floods or cyclones, both of which are likely to become more frequent due to the impacts of global climate change. Recent floods are the worst to have hit the region in decades. Till date, the government's disaster response strategy has focused, increasingly and perhaps effectively, on the physical needs of the survivors through the provision of shelter, food and physical medical care.

However, there has been no policy provision, compensation or support for those with disabilities, who are among the most vulnerable during a calamitous event. People with physical disabilities struggle with evacuation, getting relief and are more susceptible to accidents caused by natural disasters. But the mental health consequences of the disasters receive even less attention.

According to a 2006 study by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 96.9 percent of the individuals with psychosocial disabilities are from the lower-middle socioeconomic class. This makes them the most vulnerable population, requiring support especially during disasters such as floods. Our disaster management policy falls short of addressing mental health issues because, among other reasons, when we refer to "mental illnesses," we do not take into account the pervasive stereotypes, attitudes and other barriers

that result in inequalities affecting the people with mental illnesses.

Mental illness denotes a number of changes that can affect our thinking, our mood, our sense of pleasure and our behaviour. Typically though, people view mental illness as a malfunctioning of one's brain and do not consider the social factors that result in mental health conditions. A mental health condition, unless inherited, usually results from an

administrations are supposed to have lists of such individuals and they can provide adequate support to them during disasters such as floods, but to what extent that is actually practiced is a big question. That there is no systemic study and evaluation of the plight of people with physical or psychosocial disabilities in such situations is a testament to the negligence meted out towards disability in general.

One may brush aside the plight of

and displaced over one million people, the Sri Lankan government adopted a comprehensive mental health plan to address the widespread mental health conditions that ensued.

It developed a category of community mental health workers known as Community Support Officers. These volunteers, receiving small monetary incentives, were tasked with providing social support and psychological first aid and identifying people in need of additional mental health services, under the supervision of mental health professionals. They have contributed to the detection and referral of affected individuals, and provided support in their own communities. Findings of a study in three districts in the southern province of Sri Lanka showed that community support officers had referred more than half of all inpatients, and this proportion rose to 75 percent in areas where no psychiatric services had previously existed.

Not only does this show the need but also the benefits of having community-based services in low-resource settings such as Bangladesh. Bangladesh can replicate or change this model as necessary to involve community-based volunteers who can effectively address the social exclusion people with disabilities face, and increase their access to relief and rehabilitation as the ongoing flood reaches its pinnacle.

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adverse social or environmental situation. In this case, if we consider flood as an environmental factor, we need to address the mental health condition of the victims in our disaster management programmes. Not providing support to those who are already vulnerable further demoralises and disables them from recovering.

Since the responsibility to support people with disabilities lies with the Ministry of Social Welfare, district

the most marginalised as one not of immediate concern. One may also wonder if it is possible to do anything about this issue. In case one is wondering, a case study of a nation with similar resource limitations may help. Like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka had a limited number of psychiatric professionals. In 2007, they had only 25 psychiatrists for a population of 20 million people. After the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 that took 30,000 lives

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# Dream, drama, and a decaying city



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

I wake up to an unusual silence. Or so it seems as I slowly open my eyes. A gentle breeze comes along through the unlocked windowpane. I try to squint outside, baffled by the calm, and end up catching a fresh ray of the early-morning sun. Suddenly, some birds start chirping in the distant, which sounds like a medieval tune in my unaccustomed ears. The air is fresh, strangely fresh, so I take a deep, healing, diaphragmatic breath and then let it go.

Waking up has never felt more refreshing. Even before I get out of bed, something tells me that today will be different, that being visited by the fabled pin-drop silence in this city of noise may not be the only surprise of the day.

Several things happen in quick succession. I take my first sip of tea of the morning. The newspaper boy arrives. I take a shower. Breakfast is served. I dress up and head downstairs. Only when I step out of our house, after about an hour, do I finally have some time to ponder over the strangeness of today's environment, more specifically, the bizarre headlines from today's newspaper.

It is not what they said that strikes me. It is what they did not. There was no news of rape, child abuse, murder, corruption, leaked question papers, pollutions, human rights violations, public sufferings, or dissidents being sent to jail on flimsy grounds. No freewheeling, logic-defying comments by any politician. The street ahead is in perfect condition. The pile of garbage that

usually adorns it is gone. The potholes, which caused collision, bodily injury and damage to people's automobiles almost on a daily basis, have been patched up nicely. I have to look down the street again to believe the potholes are really gone.

However, a view of the main road comes with an even greater surprise. Before me is a cityscape the like of which I have never seen before. So familiar, yet so unfamiliar. If anything, it looks like something dredged from the picture books used



"Before me is a cityscape the like of which I have never seen before. So familiar, yet so unfamiliar."

to give infants the idea of a city. And I don't have the slightest idea about how and when this transformation has taken place.

The city before me is quite picturesque. A stream of traffic is moving in a slow, systematic manner. No one is trying to overtake or honk their way around another. The road is clean, intact and spacious, much more spacious than the roads I knew, with storm-drains and gutters to drain excess water. Waterlogging, it

appears, is a thing of the past. The pedestrians are using footbridges instead of weaving between vehicles. No shouting. No spitting. No careless throwing of cigarette butts or chewed betel leaf.

There are roadside waste-containers placed every few metres to prevent littering. The bins look like they are used, emptied and sanitised at regular intervals.

Getting on a bus, I take a window seat and look outside to see a clear skyline unaffected by smog. This

school uniform gets in. Apparently, students as well as the general public are now less dependent on private vehicles and instead using public buses for their daily commute. The child sits beside me, unfazed by the company of a total stranger.

From what I understand from the conversations of my fellow passengers, the city's law and order situation has improved greatly. Women and children are no longer afraid to go out alone. A benevolent government is now in power, which

important ministries, public institutions, business entities and factories have been relocated to other cities, and the authority and financial resources for providing public services transferred to local units of government agencies.

This redistribution of authority and resources, backed by a pro-people development policy, has not only created greater opportunities for the less developed areas in the country, but has also practically saved the capital from being totally unliveable.



PHOTO: STAR

*The dream may seem dramatic and quite impossible but it's one shared by an increasing number of people who can see the pillars of their city crumbling down bit by bit.*

About 30 minutes in, I get off the bus near a signalised intersection with crossing opportunities for pedestrians, cyclists and ambulances. I come across a transgender police officer manning the special lanes. While seeing a member of the marginalised community in a position of authority heartens me, my attention is soon drawn to a patch of grass that was once the site of a slum.

Upon my enquiry, the officer tells me that the residents of the slum have been rehabilitated in an

industrial zone outside the city. In fact, living and working opportunities have been created for the former residents of all the slums, street people and beggars outside the city, as part of a massive human resources development plan, which helped improve its living conditions and the overall economy.

Special reintegration measures have also been taken to address the plight of the members of all marginalised people, including the LGBT and Bihari communities, and turn them into productive citizens.

I move from place to place, road to road and neighbourhood to neighbourhood to hear stories of how a city—and a country—transformed itself and improved its physical, social, environmental and political health not through the powers of magic, but the powers of concerted efforts, good planning and judicious use of its resources.

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When I dream about my city, it looks more or less like the one narrated above. The dream may seem dramatic and quite impossible but it's one shared by an increasing number of people who can see the pillars of their city crumbling down bit by bit, and the fact that they can't do anything about it makes the pain worse. But it doesn't hurt any more than the futile promises of the politicians who seem to have sworn to never try and fulfil them, or forget their divisions to unite for a common cause. But the silver lining is, if you want something bad enough, and never stop trying to get it, it may happen. A city defines a civilisation, as someone had once said, and with our collective strength and determination, we can still save our city—and indeed our country—and remodel it to represent the best that there is in our civilisation.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

## QUOTABLE Quote



MAX PLANCK

Nobel Prize winning German Physicist and originator of modern quantum theories

Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of nature and therefore part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Skilled
  - 5 Chair wheel
  - 11 Wheel bar
  - 12 On the go
  - 13 Reach across
  - 14 Stretched to see
  - 15 Very popular
  - 16 Sailor's call
  - 17 Government income
  - 19 "The X-Files" org.
  - 22 "Skyfall" singer
  - 24 Light lunch
  - 26 Singer Turner
  - 27 Boxer La Motta
  - 28 Signs of the future
  - 30 Can't stand
  - 31 Last letter, in
- DOWN**
- 1 Morse T
  - 2 Trade show
  - 3 Leveled
  - 4 Kayo count
  - 5 Secret supply
  - 6 Unlike this answer
  - 7 Order to Spot
  - 8 Pewter component
  - 9 Raiser of Cain
  - 10 Stop signal
  - 16 Woodsman's need
  - 18 Astronaut Shepard
  - 19 Laid it on thick
  - 20 Make brownies
  - 21 Midmonth day
  - 22 Whole range
  - 23 Thin coin
  - 25 Open a bit
  - 29 Cube face
  - 30 Crone
  - 33 Single
  - 34 Revue piece
  - 36 Tough spot
  - 37 Cave creatures
  - 38 Jazz style
  - 39 Genetic messenger
  - 40 Many a time
  - 41 In the past

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

IT'S KINDA NICE TO HEAR THE PATTERN OF RAIN ON THE TENT

YEAH

IT ISN'T SO NICE FOR US TALL GUYS!

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

MOM, I'M SORRY, AND I PROMISE IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN.

WHAT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN?

I DON'T KNOW YET.

IT'S STILL EARLY, SO I THOUGHT I'D GET THE APOLOGY OUT OF THE WAY FIRST.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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S	E	E	R	S								
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