



The Daily Star

The Daily Star and CARE Bangladesh jointly organized a roundtable titled "Rethink Resilience: Women-Driving Force in Building Urban Resilience" on February 18, 2018. Here we publish a summary of the discussions.



RETHINK RESILIENCE

Women- Driving Force in Building Urban Resilience

Dr Sharmind Neelormi, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Jahangirnagar University, and moderator of the session

Bangladesh is a pioneer in addressing the issue of women's vulnerability in disaster situations. Extensive documentation has been done to assess different kinds of vulnerability women face during a disaster. Several policies and strategies have been developed to address these risks. But these interventions are largely limited to rural areas. Bangladesh is going through rapid urbanization and a large number of the population lives in urban areas. But we do not have enough documentation about the challenges urban poor are facing in their everyday life. CARE Bangladesh has made an important intervention through their Building Resilience of the Urban Poor (BRUP) Project in this regard. In today's roundtable, the findings and learning of the project will be shared, and we will discuss ways to strengthen resilience of the urban poor.

Palash Mondal. Coordinator-Climate Change and Resilience -Building Resilience of the Urban Poor Project, CARE Bangladesh

The casualty rate of women and children is 14 times higher than men during any disaster. Have we ever wondered why this is so? Does social prejudice against women contribute to their suffering? We often present women as helpless beings by bracketing them with children. By doing this, we ignore their potentials. In urban areas, social cohesion is weak. Women can play a key role in strengthening social bonds. Our experience on field, shows that in many cases women play more effective roles than men.

Unfortunately, women's leadership is yet to be recognized in disaster management. They are treated as passive receivers. We never consider them as an active actor. CARE Bangladesh wants to see women as a key force at par with men. We need to change our mindset. We need to recognize women as the driving force in building disaster resilience and it should be reflected in all of our policies and implementation strategies.

Mehru Islam, Director-PEARL Unit, CARE Bangladesh

In BRUP project, women played lead roles in planning and implementation of urban risk management initiatives. For example, in the community-based water management system under this project, women were involved in almost all the key positions. The waste management initiative led by women is another laudable effort. The whole community is getting the benefit of these interventions. This project has set a good example how women can be involved in urban risk management. Under this project, women community volunteers closely worked with the Fire Brigade. They have proved that women can successfully perform any challenging task.

Professor Dr Mahbuba Nasreen, Director, Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, University of Dhaka

Women are the silent forces of resilience. While we must recognize women's strength and contribution to disaster management, we also need to consider their vulnerabilities in the context of our existing gendered culture and economics. Moreover, the challenges women face in urban areas is different from the rural context. Thus, a woman who migrates from a village to a city does not have adequate knowledge and are not prepared enough to fight the vulnerabilities in the new environment. Projects, like BRUP, are helpful in creating knowledge about successful resilience strategies in urban areas. As I had the opportunity to closely observe this project, I can say that it has successfully addressed two major vulnerabilities in urban areas: water-crisis and water-logging.

Gawher Nayeen Wahra, Founder Member Secretary, Disaster Forum

We need to seriously think about what will happen to the trained volunteers after a project ends. The best solution is to engage them with the local government. Therefore, we have to involve local government bodies in a project from its inception.

In Dhaka city, the number of female population is much higher than the male population. A large number of them are garment workers and domestic workers. They can effectively contribute as urban community volunteers if they are trained properly.

Many of these women are working mothers, who often leave their children at home alone. These children become easy victims during a disaster, particularly during slum fires. This issue can be addressed if we follow the Anganwadi model of Kerala. Thirty women of a community form a group, where each member has the responsibility of looking after the children of all the members of the group by rotation.

The Civil Defence wing of the Fire Service and Civil Defence Department needs to be revived. It refers to a warden system, where influential and respected locals are nominated to be mobilise the local people to fight any disaster. Myanmar has successfully developed the warden system thanks to the participation of local communities. They have the least number of fire-related incidents in our region.

Mostafa Quaim Khan, Adviser, Bangladesh Urban Forum

Unfortunately, Bangladesh has not been included in the list of '100 Resilient Cities' programme. This was a great opportunity for the country to build urban resilience of the capital city.

I want to highlight three points for building urban resilience. First, local governments need to be involved in all resilience building programmes, as they can play a big role in ensuring community participation in these programmes. Local volunteers should work in cooperation with local government bodies.

Secondly, urban resilience should be made a part of our public education programme. There can be a separate course on this topic in every educational institution.

The government should facilitate and incentivise urban resilience building efforts of NGOs and private organisations.

M. Khalid Mahmood, Joint Secretary and Director, Department of Disaster Management

Our Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) is basically designed to address disasters in rural areas. Now the government is revising the SOD. Urban disaster resilience will get due importance in the revised SOD, as there will be provision for a ward disaster management committee. I request all the participants of today's roundtable to send their observations and suggestions regarding the SOD, so that we can prepare a comprehensive disaster management policy for the country.

We prioritize women-led families in all our disaster management programmes, and it's the same for urban resilience programmes.

Earlier, Bangladesh did not have the capacity to fulfill all the requirements of the '100 Resilient City' programme, but we will definitely join the second phase of the programme.

Tasnia Tasnim, Research Officer, International Centre for Climate Change and Development

Our goal is to develop climate resilience in urban areas. We are currently working with female slum dwellers in two slum areas of Dhaka. I have discovered from my work experience that it is very important to develop an effective communication tool for disseminating climate change related messaging to the urban poor. Another important thing is to ensure land security for these people, without which they will live in perpetual vulnerability.

Dilruba Haider, Programme Specialist, Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change and Humanitarian Actions, UNWomen Bangladesh

The government has established disaster forums at Municipality level, but representation of women in these forums is still poor. We need to increase the number of women representatives in these forums as well as develop their leadership capacity to ensure quality participation. We also need to make men aware about the importance of women's role in disaster preparedness.

I want to highlight the women-led waste management initiative of BURP, which has become a very effective intervention. If women are made aware about waste management, it can bring about a dramatic change in this particular intervention, as women do the primary work of waste management in every household.

Social cohesion is key for building resilience in urban areas. I am very glad to see that this aspect has been given due importance in this project.

Nurjahan Akhter Sheuli, Urban Community Volunteer, FSCD, Tongi

When CARE Bangladesh and Bangladesh Fire Services wanted to train up some volunteers from our neighbourhood, I joined the team. Being a woman, I was so excited about working for Bangladesh Fire Service. Just a few days after I took the training, a fire broke out in Tempaco, which is located in our area. I saw the news on TV and saw this as an opportunity to work at the field level and apply what I learned. So, along with other women volunteers of my area, I participated in the rescue operation. Although I have learned many things from the training, there were many new things for me to learn from that rescue operation. We have proved that women can do this type of hard work. We have proved it many times—in the case of the Tempaco fire, Tetulota fire, etc. In the beginning, people of our locality, especially men, didn't take this positively, but at one point they realised the importance of our work.

Abdul Latif Khan, Adjunct Faculty, Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS), University of Dhaka.

We need to explain the meaning of the word 'resilience.' Currently we are doing a survey on child-centred urban resilience. If we have to build urban resilience, apart from the risks of disasters, we also have to consider the social risks. And we desperately need women leadership.

In 1970, after the cyclone hit the country, we arranged a cyclone

preparedness programme. The death toll of the 1991 cyclone was extremely high and the number of deaths of women and children was also very high. A survey done during that time found that there were no woman volunteers in the

preparedness programme. We then recruited women volunteers for the first time and now one-third of the CPV volunteers are women. But we should not be satisfied only with the increased number of women volunteers, we need to ensure a women-friendly environment so that their role is accepted in society.

We also need to encourage more participation of local government. We had worked for the Asian Urban Disaster Preparedness Programme in Gazipur. After our project ended, there were absolutely no activities of disaster preparedness because we failed to engage the local government there.

Shashanka Saadi, Head, Emergency Preparedness and Response Programme, BRAC International

At present, a lot of discussion is going on about the localisation of humanitarian response. This means that when a disaster strikes a country, people will not have to wait for others to run the rescue operations; local people will be able to carry out their own rescue operations. This can only be done by strengthening the preparedness programme at the local level.

Disaster preparedness programmes have been going on for the last thirty years, and there should be no doubt about the success of such programmes. It is important to change our perception to make the impact of the programmes sustainable. If we really want to strengthen the localisation agenda, we need to bring the successes of the projects to the limelight.

Through these kinds of projects, we can focus on the markers of resilience. We need to work on how we can minimise the risks of a disaster, on which levels we need to work to build resilience, how to connect this with social safety nets, etc. Also, mainstreaming the education and health sector is very important here. We then need to find out what kind of innovations can be done here.

Most importantly, if we are not able to involve the majority population—the lower middle class, middle class and upper middle class—we cannot claim that we are creating urban resilience.

We need to replicate and scale-up these kinds of programmes, and the government needs to take more responsibility here, as it claims that Bangladesh will soon become a middle-income country.

A.K.M. Mamunur Rashid, Climate Change Specialist, Climate Change, Environment and Disaster (CCED) Cluster, UNDP

There is a continuum between rural and urban resilience. As long as we are unable to establish that continuum, we cannot progress. I think urbanisation itself is a resilience indicator. A more planned urbanisation can lead to a more resilient nation. The GDP contribution of Dhaka city in the national economy is more than 60 percent. If we look at the four major cities of the country,

more than 75 percent of the GDP comes from the cities. The contribution of agriculture to the GDP is decreasing, and we now have a service-oriented economy which is largely informal. Urban areas are densely populated and most people who migrate here originally belong to risk-prone areas. So the central question here is: can a city absorb these people with a more robust economy? If the cities are ready to absorb this population, it would be a big solution to the whole resilience narrative of the nation. Thus it is important to design and plan the urban settlements properly. We have not yet thought of the neighbourhood approach.

Solely paying tax to the city government and stating that the community has a lot more to do is not a sustainable solution. The city government should also play their due role.

In case of women leadership, the important institutions in the urban areas must be led by women. We have to look into these institutions to find out how patriarchy works there. We also need to find out the scopes within the structure of these institutions to promote women leadership.

Lastly, if we can solve three major urban problems, namely the mosquito menace, air pollution and waste management, the whole urbanisation process can be made more resilient.

Parvin Akhter, Community Leader, Medical Community, Tongi

We live in slums and nobody really cares about us. Since most people in the slums are illiterate, they do not know how to value women. The men in our slum used to torture women and confine them to their homes. They could not even think of seeing women in leadership roles. When CARE first came to our area, the men in the slums did not take them seriously. When they

(CARE) told them they wanted women and children of our area to work for disaster preparedness, men again did not take them seriously. But with time, the scenario has changed.

In the past we did not know what to do in the event of an earthquake or fire. But now we know what to do. Previously, we did not have access to safe drinking water and we used to live in unhygienic conditions, but now we have access to safe drinking water and we have also learned to keep our area clean. This was not possible ten years ago. And this has been made possible only because women in our slum got united and formed a committee. Now we try to help each other out in whatever way we can.

Suman Ahsanul Islam, Country Director, Humanitarian Leadership Academy

Last year, there was an outbreak of Chikungunya - a mosquito-borne disease - in Dhaka, and we were not at all prepared to deal with this outbreak.

Had it been a fatal disease, a large

number of people would have died. And all because of a lack of preparedness on our part.

Whenever we talk about urban resilience, we talk about earthquakes, fire, waterlogging, etc. But we hardly talk about the current and prospective health hazards. Because of climate change, we might have to deal with new types of health hazards. Thus, the health issue is very important here and must be included in our urban disaster resilience programme.

Another important issue is mobility of women. A woman has to face and overcome many problems in the process of getting out of her home and going to the office of the ward commissioner. Thus, her safety must be given due importance.

Mausumi Sharmin, Gender Coordinator, Concern Worldwide

We have seen from our research that 66 percent of women living in the slums are victims of physical and sexual harassment by their husbands.

Compared to other women, women living in slums are 35 percent more prone to the risk of violence. Many of the women living in slums work as domestic helps. The houses they work in are not safe for them either. They are often tortured and harassed by their employers. It is really difficult for women to contribute to society when they are exposed to all kinds of risks. Thus the community approach is a strong approach where women of an area unite to face the risks.

Also, the children of these women have to face various risks, including physical and sexual harassment and even trafficking. We are trying to set up daycare centres at the community level. In order to build such a system, we need the government's support as well as community engagement.

Biswojit Kumar Roy, Senior Technical Manager-Resilience, CARE Bangladesh

We all know that after a project ends, the achievements of the project also get lost. We have to find ways to make the achievements long lasting. When we developed a waste management system in six communities of Gazipur, we engaged the officials of the waste management team of the city corporation. Afterwards, the team took initiatives and formed

committees, engaging women in 17 other communities. Gazipur is an industrial area. In that area we, with the help of the City Corporation and Ha-Meem group, took initiatives to make the waste management system durable. The Gazipur City Corporation followed our model.

We tried to connect some persons from the slums to the City Corporation officials so that after our project ends, they can carry on the good work. Also, we did not just provide training to the Urban Committee Volunteers (UCV) but also tried to connect them with the local Fire Service office.

The engagement and participation of local volunteers can be best presented by an example. In the recent past, after a fire broke out at Konabari, our women volunteers started their work even before the fire service staff reached the area.

Nushrat Rahman Chowdhury, Senior Officer-Advocacy, Save the Children

When a woman returns home with her salary at the end of the month, muggers often snatch their money. This happens in the industrial areas of Narayanganj, Gazipur and Savar. Moreover, garment workers are often sacked for reasons not known to them. They don't even get their dues. Women are not at risk because of their own limitations, they are vulnerable because of their

surroundings. These same women can plan for their areas and present that plan before the mayor with full confidence. When they work as volunteers and extinguish fires, they do it so skillfully that it is hard to believe that they had to take permission from their fathers and brothers before going to do that.

Farhana Hafiz, Gender and Women Rights Analyst

I want to share a personal experience. In the first week of January in 2016, an earthquake hit Dhaka city. What I noticed is that most of the people who came down to the street at the dead of night in Dhanmondi were men, while women mostly stayed at home. They did not come to the street because they thought their nightdress might not be acceptable to others.

Although we are saying that women are the driving force, we still are not prepared to see women as the embodiment of the powerful Goddess Durga.

Apart from the garment sector, many women are working in the education and health sector and a large number are staying at home. The question is: are they prepared to play their role in the advent of a disaster? There needs to be coordination between the Ministry of Disaster Management and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

Brig Gen (Retd.) Shahedul Anam Khan, Associate Editor, The Daily Star

I want to highlight two aspects of today's roundtable. First, we need to redefine the concept of resilience and make it more inclusive and participatory. We have to especially ensure quality participation of women in disaster management efforts. Secondly, we need to create awareness among men about the importance of women's contribution in tackling a disaster.