

Time to address women's security, privacy at disaster shelters

Say women after having bitter experience at the poorly designed buildings

NILIMA JAHAN

The news on rape of a 14-year-old intellectually impaired girl at a disaster shelter, in Pachgachhi union of Kurigram Sadar upazila in 2018, did not make it to the headlines of major newspapers or outlets, but it offers a glimpse of the vulnerabilities women and girls face during natural disasters.

According to 30-year-old Rawshan Ara, from the same union, who was at the shelter on that very day, said most people taking shelter there gathered on the rooftop where a group of local boys were playing music on loud speakers. "One of the local boys, who targeted her [the rape victim] earlier in the day, came downstairs and raped her inside a dark room."

"Although the boy was sent to jail immediately after the scene, he was later released after the girl's grandmother was forced to settle the whole thing in exchange for money," she added.

According to climate change specialists and rights activists, even though women in a family manage almost everything during natural disasters, the plight and specific needs of women, girls and gender diverse populations remain ignored largely during and after disasters.

They are also kept out of the loop while disaster management and resilience building programmes are formulated, they also said.

According to a report produced jointly by Participatory Research Action Network and ActionAid Bangladesh and in collaboration with The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), among the 3.3 million people affected by this year's prolonged floods, 52 percent are women.

The double blow by Covid-19 and cyclone Amphan have made the south-western region of the country suffer even more. Out of the 2.6 million people affected by the cyclone in 19 districts, 8 lakh 20 thousand were women, including 49,316 pregnant women.

According to the report, many areas of the country's southern part remain submerged in saline water after collapse of embankments this year and the continuing exposure to saline water is causing complications to reproductive health of local women.

Besides, in flooded areas where tube wells and toilets went under water and where safe water as well as personal hygiene materials are



A disaster shelter in Patuakhali's Galachipa upazila.

unavailable, women have been facing severe problems in maintaining hygiene during the days of their periods.

Many women and girls living in disaster-prone areas said during early stages of flood, they can stay home by elevating beds with bricks or bamboo scaffoldings. But they have to move out to disaster shelters when the water level rises or the current grows stronger.

A number of the women from those areas -- including Barguna, Jamalpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Satkira and Rangamati -- also

said reaching the shelters do not end their sufferings as women's security is often overlooked at the shelters.

Based on her past experience of harassments such as catcalling, indecent comments or obscene gestures made by delinquent youths and men during her stay at a disaster shelter, Rawshan Ara took shelter at her relative's house in Kurigram Sadar upazila this year, when her house was flooded.

"There was no lighting in the shelter and men and women from more than 10 different

families were crammed in one single room. We stayed up the entire night to keep ourselves safe from eyeballing of men.

"After that rape incident, many parents, including my mother, have become reluctant to take their young female family members to the shelters," she explained.

Khodeja Begum, from Dewanganj in Jamalpur, said mothers feel insecure for their daughters at disaster shelters.

Since the shelters had no privacy for women or girls and lacked adequate toilet or shower

STAR FILE PHOTO

facilities for all residents, men whistled and made obscene gestures at them while she and her 11-year-old daughter ate, slept or took showers there.

"My daughter got very frustrated this time. She stopped eating and sat in a corner during the entire stay," she added.

Without adequate toilets and private areas designated for women, it is extremely difficult for women, especially the ones with disabilities, to maintain hygiene during their periods and breastfeed their infants at the disaster shelters.

In most of the shelters, around 50 families share two toilets. And when those are occupied, people have no choice but go far on a boat to relieve themselves in the water.

"This is so common [at the shelters] that we would lower our food or drink intake so we wouldn't need to defecate in the day. But then again, there is no security for women at night, when men would attempt to forcibly grab girls on way to the unlit toilets or deliberately occupy the boats," said a girl, who is a college student in Pathorghata of Barguna.

Absence of designated areas to ensure privacy of women and limited toilet facilities at the disaster shelters are leading to infection and skin diseases as women are unable to change wet rags during days of menstruation, said Khodeja from Dewanganj.

While speaking at a webinar titled "Women's vulnerabilities in Emergency: unheard voices", organised last month by ActionAid Bangladesh, Atiqul Huq, director general of Department of Disaster Management (DDM), said they prepared a draft action plan for disaster management for the years 2021 to 2025.

In the plan, they are making efforts to involve women, children and differently abled population in disaster management, he said, adding, "A separate corner for women is being set up at new cyclone shelters. Keeping the needs of women and persons with disabilities in mind, the DDM is going to purchase 60 rescue boats soon."

ActionAid Bangladesh Country Director Farah Kabir at the webinar stressed the need for establishing women-friendly disaster shelters that would be managed by women and arranging psychosocial counselling for women at the shelters.

Bumper Aman yield expected

Profuse flowering brings smile to Pirojpur farmers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur



PHOTO: STAR

An Aman field at Pattashi village in Pirojpur's Indurkani upazila.

Although Aman cultivation in Pirojpur has been delayed this year due to prolonged floods during the peak season of plantation, farmers and agriculture officials are expecting good yield as the district sees profuse flowering of the paddy plants.

The profuse flowering has kindled hope of good harvest, said farmers.

Four varieties of Aman-local, upshi, boan and hybrid--have been planted.

The growers said they usually complete planting Aman saplings within August every year. But this year, it has been more than a month delay in cultivating the paddy due to the prolonged floods.

"Generally production is hampered badly if local variety of Aman saplings is not planted in time," said Mintu Kazi, a farmer from Pattashi village in Indurkani upazila of the district.

But this year, profuse flowering of the paddy plants has kindled hope of good harvest although the plantation has been delayed, he added.

The farmers further added that severe pest attack worries them every year. But this year, there was no pest attack.

"Although the cultivation has been delayed this year, we are expecting good harvest of Aman as the paddy plants flowered hugely," said another farmer from Charkhali village in the same upazila.

"If no natural disaster occurs, we will get good production from the fields," he added.

The growers said Aman is the main

crop in the southern areas of the country including Pirojpur. It fulfills the main demand of paddy in the district.

Indurkani upazila agriculture officer Humayra Siddique said despite the unfavourable weather during the season of plantation, they are expecting good yield as profuse flowers adorn the Aman plants.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), this year Aman paddy has been planted on 64,484 hectares of land this year. Among them, local variety has been cultivated on 51,520 hectares of land.

Last year, 64,188 hectares of land were brought under Aman cultivation and 1.8 tonnes of rice was produced in one hectare of land, it added.

'Chukai' not that sour, really!

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Several farmers in flood-prone areas of Netrakona's Barhatta upazila -- an area dotted with wetlands or haors -- are delighted to find the sweeter side of a local sour fruit that is locally known as 'chukai'.

People elsewhere are relatively unfamiliar with this fruit, but it is cultivated in small-scale in different areas of Barhatta, for personal consumption in the form of jam and pickles or as an ingredient in different local dishes cooked with small fish or lentil, locals said.

Dudu Mia, a farmer from Bhatipara village in Singdha union, said he started growing chukai commercially this year and he made a good profit from its sales.

"I've been growing chukai for personal consumption for more than 10 years. But this year, I cultivated 1,500 chukai plants around my house, on banks of a canal and several ponds for commercial cultivation and the profit [from the harvest] is beyond my imagination."

Earlier this year, during three back-to-back flash floods, around 500 of the plants were damaged. "Like many other farmers, I was also seriously affected in this year's floods, but the profit from chukai cultivation has helped me a lot in coping with financial crisis," said Dudu.

Taking care of the plants is quite easy and the cost of cultivation is really low -- Tk 5,000 for 1,500 plants. "I started to sell the fruits in August, for Tk 100 each kilogram on an average and these are still



The tiny red tangy fruit apparently has commercial potential.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

selling well. So far, the profit has been more than Tk 2 lakh," said Dudu, who was all smiles.

Rob Mia, a farmer from the same village, said he also made a profit of over Tk 1 lakh so far from fruits harvested from 400 chukai plants.

"I'll go for commercial cultivation of more chukai plants next season," he said, adding that a number of farmers from surrounding villages, including Basaura, Durgapur, are

Dharam and Chandrapur, have been showing interest in chukai cultivation commercially.

Muhaiminur Rashid, agriculture officer in Barhatta upazila, said, "If chukai could be cultivated commercially, hundreds of haor farmers would benefit greatly and make a good living for a small cost."

The red fruit also has use as natural fruit colouring, he said, adding that it is available mostly at

markets in Barhatta and Mohanganj upazilas and it has some demands in Dhaka as well.

Deputy Director of Department of Agricultural Extension in Netrakona Habibur Rahman said they have been running campaigns to create awareness among haor farmers towards benefits of cultivating different vegetables and fruits such as chukai, aside from the cultivation of rice traditionally.



People of Dalit community form a human chain in Chapainawabganj yesterday. Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, Chapainawabganj unit, organised the rally in front of Abdul Mannan Sentu Market in the town marking the World Dignity Day.

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