

Gender Sensitive Approaches for Disaster Management

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“Both women and men are part of the same society, which, as we know, does not mean we have the same rights, education and options to manage, neither in ‘normal’ times, nor when a disaster strikes.”

– Women, Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development, UNISDR Secretariat, April 2003¹.

Introduction

Disaster is a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society. Disaster is an event or series of events, which gives rise to casualties and damage to properties, infrastructures, environment, essential services or means of livelihood on such a scale which is beyond the normal capacity of the affected community to cope with by using its own resources. Disasters are not new to mankind, earthquake, cyclone, hailstorms, cloud-burst; landslide, soil erosion, snow avalanche, flood etc. are there since time immemorial

Disaster risk reduction is a broad approach, which includes all action aiming to reduce disaster risks. Action can be political, technical, social and economic. Disaster risk reduction takes forms as varied as policy guidance, legislation, preparedness plans, agricultural projects, an insurance scheme, or even swimming lessons. The approach enables people to think and work across the society, to make sure that everyone from government to individual makes the right

1 Gender and Disasters, *available at*, <http://www.undp.org/> last accessed on 24th March, 2017

decisions to reduce the risk and impact of disasters. By doing so, a coming storm or flood will not be able to turn bad weather into a disasters.

While disasters do not make decisions, people most certainly can and do. Before, during and in the aftermath of disasters, human beings perpetuate social patterns of discrimination, and these entrenched patterns cause certain groups of people to suffer more than others.

Gender and Disaster

The term “gender” refers to the socially-constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for a person based on his or her assigned sex at birth.² Women, girls, boys and men belonging to different age and socio-economic strata have distinct vulnerabilities. They experience disasters in different ways, and their ability to recover from it also varies. In countries where gender discrimination is tolerated, women and girls are more vulnerable to natural hazards. Not only is the percentage of women and girls who die higher in these countries, but the incidence of gender-based violence including rape, human trafficking are also more.

In recent years, the upsurge of knowledge and research on ‘Gender and Disaster’, has highlighted

2 Definition adapted from World Health Organization, “Gender, women and health,” www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/ last accessed on 24th March 2017.

the way in which a significant proportion of disaster planning, management and research overlooks gender, despite recognition within the social sciences that there exists a 'gendered dimension' to the responses to any social event. Failure to acknowledge this not only runs the risk of overlooking obvious and more subtle needs and priorities that can make all the difference between life and death, but can also diminish the efficiency of disaster responses.³

There is a direct relationship between gender equality, women's empowerment and disasters. On one hand, women are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of disasters, which could, in turn, exacerbate existing gender disparities. On the other hand, women have unique knowledge and skills which can help towards responses to climate change and disasters more effectively. Disaster Management Policies that therefore take account of gender-based vulnerability and the unique contribution that women can make could help advance gender equality and women's empowerment while fighting the disasters. The potential contributions that women can offer to disaster risk reduction around the world are often overlooked and their leadership in building community resilience to disasters is hardly highlighted. This is reflected in the lack of a platform for women in formal disaster management organizations for sharing their needs, experiences and priorities. Gender stereotypes also places stress on men to assume greater responsibilities on account of gendered norms and expectations. Hence, the vulnerabilities and capacities of men, women, boys and girls need to be taken into account while designing any

intervention in disaster mitigation as well as disaster response.

Forms of violence against women during Disasters

Violence against victim women can take any form like Physical, sexual or psychological abuses etc. Victim women and girls in irregular situations are particularly vulnerable to labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced begging, slavery and many other forms of violence. Disasters do not differentiate between men and women, but the consequences of disasters create different levels of victimisation among men and women. Many instances of human rights violations, such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse, against women in the aftermath of disasters have been noted. The evidence shows that, during as well as post disaster, violence increases, that include domestic violence as well as sexual violence. This violence occurs in camps, in shelters, in homes, and on the streets. The effect of such violence is not limited to physical and mental impact on its victims only, but this violence has social and economic impacts for individuals, families and on the entire affected community. Therefore, we cannot afford to overlook this issue against human right of females.

Why violence against victim women?

Women are typically more vulnerable than men to the effects of natural disasters and climate change, not only because of biological and physiological differences, but also, notably, because of socio-economic differences and inequitable power relations. As a result, in most cases, mortality rates in disasters are higher sometimes much higher for women than for men. Women seem to have higher mortality rates in countries where their enjoyment of economic and social rights is low.

3 2nd India Disaster Management Congress, at National Institute of Disaster Management, Delhi. (4-6 November 2009)

There can be many other reasons of violence, such as, unequal access to assets, education, knowledge and power deprives women of the resources and capability to protect themselves, their children and their assets from disasters. National planning for disaster relief and recovery often excludes consideration of gender-based vulnerability and risks, even though women in developing countries bear the greatest responsibility for managing household resources. Women's physical structure and the performance of certain functions place her at the disadvantage position. In some cases, women are not allowed to make the decision to evacuate.

There is a clear need for recognising the human rights of women within the broader human rights-disaster management interface. This is due to the vulnerability of women during disasters and post-disaster rebuilding. Underlining the urgent need for focussing on a gender perspective women's rights were especially prone to violation due to the socio-economic status and existing patriarchal structure of societies.

Role of women in Disaster Management

Women play significant roles in all stages of Disaster Management. They are often at the frontline as responders and bring valuable resources to disaster and climate risk reduction and recovery. However, the important roles or potential roles women take on are often not recognized, and women themselves are largely marginalized in the development of Disaster Risk Reduction policy and decision-making processes and their voices go unheard.

Women serve their communities as leaders in ways that often go unrecognized by national governments and international organizations. While they may not hold positions of visible political leadership, women are key to a society's

social fabric and hence, its capacity for resilience. They shape behaviour and transmit culture and knowledge through kin and social networks, which are critical to risk prevention and response efforts.

Moreover, they help to rebuild their communities after disasters strike. Women often serve as teachers, nurses and social workers and as such are well-placed to assess community needs and implement disaster relief and recovery programs. Women's leadership in civil society organizations can provide the potential for their participation in more formal processes of Disaster Risk Reduction, response and recovery efforts.

In reality, while women's vulnerability to disasters is often highlighted, their actual and potential roles in Disaster Risk Reduction have often been overlooked. Few existing policies and projects recognized the skills and capacities of women which could significantly contribute to disaster risk reduction policies and building resilience. Gender-specific capacities of women deriving from their social roles proved to be beneficial for their whole communities during every stage of the disaster cycle.

Therefore, special attention should be paid to the need to enhance women's capacity to manage risks, with a view to reducing their vulnerability and maintaining or increasing their opportunities for development.

Global Strategy for empowering women towards Disaster Risk Reduction

The United Nations through its various meetings and pronouncements is giving call to its member-nations to remove as early as possible, the ugly practice of gender discrimination. The international community is committed to eliminate violence against women and girls and has recognised in various global and regional

legal and policy instruments the important role of prevention towards this end.

To prevent the gender violence, a holistic, evidence-based and coordinated approach is needed. Thus, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies (IFRC) is making violence prevention, mitigation and response a priority through its global strategy for 2011-2020, and is increasingly working with National Societies to integrate violence prevention in response to emergencies.⁴

The United Nations Development Programme had constituted Eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for ensuring equity and peace across the world by the year 2015. The third MDG was centred towards promoting gender equality and empowering women.⁵

The Ministry for Women and Child Development was established as a Department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in India. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to formulate plans, policies and programmes.⁶

The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was set up exclusively to

help women via the Constitution by reviewing Legal and Constitutional safeguards for women, recommending remedial legislative measures, by facilitating quick redresses of grievances and by advising the Government of India on all policy matters affecting women.

The responsibility of the government of the country, for prevention of violence against women and girls through social and behavioural change is supported by the foundational treaty on women's human rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which establishes signatories' legal obligation to take 'all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. General Recommendation 19 of the CEDAW Committee defines violence as a form of discrimination against women, and establishes the obligation of States to act with 'due diligence' to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

Gender dimensions of natural disasters have gained increasing recognition at the international level since the 1990s. Initial strategies for disaster risk reduction developed for the 1990-2000 International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction failed to include specific gender components. However, much progress has since been made to mainstream gender in disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies and programs, particularly since 2001, due to the engagement of UNDP, UNISDR and other UN agencies such as UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Commission on the Status of Women

4 International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Istanbul Convention Violence Against Migrant Women, available at, www.ifrc.org/international-day-for-the-elimination-of-violence-against-women last accessed on 25/03/2017

5 United Nations Millennium Development Goals - the United Nations, available at, www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml last accessed on 25/03/2017

6 Dr. Shruti Singh, Dr. Rani Abha, et.al.(eds.), Socarates, pg 19 Vol. 1 No.1 (2013)

International financial organizations and regional and civil society organizations.

Gender is a cross-cutting principle of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2000-2015: on Building Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disaster, which states that: "A gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management and education and training." As to the latest developments, the Beijing Agenda for Global Action on Gender-Sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction has been adopted at the International Conference on Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction, held from April 20 to 22 this 2009 in Beijing. This agenda sets nine goals to be achieved before 2015.

Beijing Agenda for Global Action on Gender-Sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction⁷

1. Increase political commitment to gender analysis and gender mainstreaming through enhanced cooperation and collaboration between Ministries responsible for disaster risk reduction, climate change, poverty reduction and gender issues, with the participation of civil society;
2. Develop and review national policies, relevant laws, strategies, plans and budgets and take immediate action to mainstream gender into national development policies, planning and programmes;
3. Foster the linkage between disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation

⁷ Available at www.unisdr.org/files/8024_8961BeijingAgenda last accessed on 24th March 2017.

from a gender perspective through policy and administrative measures;

4. Collect gender-specific data and statistics on impact of disasters, carry out gender-sensitive vulnerability, risk and capacity assessments and develop gender sensitive-indicators to monitor and measure progress;
5. Increase awareness of the public and media on the gender-sensitive vulnerabilities and capacities in disasters and gender-specific needs and concerns in disaster risk reduction and management;
6. Support research institutions to study the cost-benefit and efficiency of gender-sensitive policies and programmes in disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and poverty reduction;
7. Secure the actual application of disaster risk assessments as part of development policy-making and programme formulation to prevent disasters from making the poor even poorer;
8. Improve and mainstream a gender perspective and equal participation between men and women in the coordination of disaster preparedness humanitarian response and recovery through capacity building and training; and
9. Build and enhance the capacities of professional organizations, communities and pertinent national and local institutions to enable gender mainstreaming into all development sectors.

Conclusion

Though plethora of legislations exists, but due to ineffective enforcement women are still being exploited by the male dominated society. Male

dominated society has found ways to circumvent the provisions of the Acts and act as a blockade against women empowerment.

Therefore, the challenges lie in translating policies and guidelines into effective practice. In addition, there is still much to be done to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into national legislation and policies for Disaster Management, which should not only involve the participation of women in their development, but efforts must also be taken to ensure that women are well-informed too.

Therefore, to ensure the integration of gender-sensitive approaches, it requires the active engagement of civil society, particularly human rights groups and associations of women to monitor both the development and implementation of these policies. National Human Rights Commission can also play an important role in identifying areas where women have been excluded from planning processes and groups of women can develop mechanisms in which women can come together to identify their common concerns and develop strategies for

voice these concerns to those in policy-making positions.

Even though, the constitution of India has provided equality of both the sexes men and women but biological condition of the female and developed sense of subordination demand extra protection for them. Thus the law and justice demands additional privileges and safeguards for maintaining proper socio-legal status of women in the society.

Therefore, empowering women in Disaster Risk Reduction consolidates investments in gender equality in development at both the national and local level. Strengthening women's knowledge and capacity for achieving community disaster resilience will not only reduce development losses, but will also help to accelerate the development processes. Thus, until there is empowerment of women, dissemination of legal awareness amongst them, economic status raised with the family and in the society, law will remain effective on papers only.