

Gender and Disability Issues⁵

Those who are already socioeconomically and physically disadvantaged or lag behind in access to resources are at much greater risk of suffering severe impacts of a disaster. Similarly, those who are illiterate and cannot read early warning announcements and instructions barely participate in disaster preparedness activities. Women generally participate less in early preparedness activities and, in any kind of disaster, there is a higher percentage of death among women and children. Women's physical size, strength, and endurance in relation to men; states of pregnancy and lactation; their primary responsibility for infants, small children, and the elderly; and often clothing, may all serve to slow them down at the very moment when time is crucial to survival.

Women's greater socioeconomic marginality is due to their limited access to resources, social and cultural practices, their responsibility for the household, and so on. The social construction of predefined gender bias creates a gap between equal accessibility to resources and opportunities. This is particularly visible at the household level, where relationships between females and males are structured around asymmetrical access to resources, which at their most extreme, are expressed in women's disproportionately poorer health and nutritional status; lower levels of literacy, education, and income-generating work; and higher morbidity and mortality rates relative to men. The culture and society of the HKH region generally considers women as a means for reproduction and domestic work, and confines them to the domestic periphery. Because it is felt that women do not need education to run a house, they have limited access to education. Furthermore, they are always busy with household activities, in addition to working in the field, which increases their dependency on men. They are less exposed to the outside world and are very much unaware of what is happening in their surroundings, including any impending natural hazards.

Gender issues are vital to disaster risk management. Gender-biased attitudes and stereotypes can complicate and extend the time for women's recovery from a disaster. It is, therefore, critical to understand the gender dimensions of the disaster-management process in order to address root causes and take equitable and efficient risk-reduction measures.

In these and other examples from real life, the gender issue is seldom just a woman's issue. More often than not it is a family affair, a community concern, a social issue, a financial and economic question, and, in the final analysis, a matter of individual and collective choice.

When priorities are established, women's interests are often the most poorly represented as they are generally absent from decision-making forums. Thus, women's concerns are least likely to be addressed, whereas women are most likely to be affected by floods.



Figure 9: Woman carrying a child while crossing a drainage channel

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⁵ Prepared with contributions from Ms. Dechenla Sherpa, ICIMOD.

Training women to deal with disease control, malnutrition, food shortages, revival and treatment of the land, and crop production is an important role of CFFRMCs. A gender perspective would advocate that the roles of men and women be examined separately and strategies for protection and mitigation be targeted specifically at men and women based on these roles.

Women's lower literacy and educational levels relative to men also contribute to their reduced access to post-disaster relief activities. After disasters, women often have to prove their legal right to land and other productive resources if their husbands have died. There is a wide gap between the written rules and the reality, with customary laws, traditions, and cultural factors often holding sway, especially in rural areas.

Women are also adversely affected by socio-cultural norms of female modesty, which restrict them from moving about easily and interacting with relief and reconstruction workers, who are typically male.

3.1 Why Focus on Gender Roles?

It is important that men and women participate equally in disaster preparedness activities. Women can play important roles in identifying those who need rescue during disasters. For example, they are aware of the sick, the elderly, and children. It has been observed that most women die in disasters when they try to save their children and property. Because women often use the land, water, and animals to earn a living and feed their families, they try to conserve these resources for future use, and help keep water clean, soil fertile, forests sustainable, and livestock healthy.

Women are more likely than men to share ideas and resources, because they are more organised at the grassroots level (Mehta 2007b). They build lively networks of friends at work, in schools, in their neighbourhoods, and in their religious obligations. Often in a disaster, women's groups take the lead in helping rebuild community solidarity. In addition, women and children are the frontline community volunteers in the villages and are the 'first responders'. Therefore, it is important to build their capacity, not only to enable them to save their lives and property, but also to be active partners in mitigating flash floods. Proportional representation of women to address women's issues about the distribution and use of relief funds and available government funds must be assured. Women's participation will ensure that during and after flash floods they are not seen as a burden, but as a resource for the community.

Capacity building initiatives for women will not only strengthen them to face flash floods, but will also bring about a positive change in personality development. The knowledge and skills gained for preparedness are useful in emergencies, but given women's role in the household, they can also use this knowledge in everyday life. Therefore, it is important to target women in capacity building initiatives and to empower them (CAP-NET 2006).

There is considerable evidence that in the aftermath of disasters women and girls have an increased risk of physical and sexual violence. Authorities typically fail to intervene because of the widespread assumption that domestic violence is a personal matter, or they just let the matter go because they think that people have already suffered a lot from the flash flood (FAO 2004).

Some examples of problems faced by women during disasters

Violation of privacy: During disasters such as floods or prolonged waterlogging, women often face problems with bathing. As the whole area is inundated, they have to bathe in unhygienic situations or in polluted water. Moreover, since their mobility is restricted, they cannot go far from the house and need to leave behind children and elderly family members.

Lack of sanitation facilities: As the sanitation system breaks down during a disaster, women become victimised. They cannot go to any open place like men (FAO 2004). When we visited a government office that was used as a temporary shelter for flood stricken people in Jamalpur district, Bangladesh, during the 2004 flood, we found that the officers had closed the sanitary facilities because they did not want the refugees to make the toilets dirty. Some women courageously approached us and said, "Sir, we don't want relief. Please

tell the officers to allow us to use the latrine. Every morning we will clean it before they come to the office. We know that you have come to observe the situation and ultimately provide relief, but what you will not provide are sanitation facilities for us.”

Creation of new vulnerabilities through relief interventions: Sometimes relief measures can create vulnerability for women. Moving to the relief distribution place, waiting in queues for a long time, even for a whole day with their children, and carrying the relief goods all become a tremendous burden for women. Very often clothes distributed to disaster-stricken families are inadequate and are used by the male members of the family. The specific needs of women are not considered.

Harassment during disasters: Adolescent girls and middle-aged women are prime targets for harassment (IUCN 2006). In many cases after floods, the husband has to go out in search of earnings and leave the women behind. As a result, the whole family has to face scarcity of food and other basic necessities. Poor adolescent girls who have to work away from their homes also face harassment – even getting trapped by brokers of brothels.

Lack of access to information: Women have less access to information than men and are often ignored during planning and implementation of risk reduction programmes at the community level. In the case of a disaster, they may not be aware of evacuation routes, safe locations, shelters, relief distribution points, and so on.

3.2 Women’s Potential to Combat Disaster

Women possess strengths that can play a very significant role in combating disaster, especially at the family level. Patience, the capacity to make decisions quickly, the extraordinary capacity for household management, and taking care of children and aged members of the family with profound affection are a few worth mentioning.

Women play a key role in family-level preparedness and can introduce innovative mechanisms and techniques such as making portable stoves for cooking during floods; preservation of dry foods, fodder, and fuel; and saving in contingency funds for emergencies. They have developed these from family wisdom and traditional practices for coping with disasters (FAO/WFP 2008). These abilities of women provide great strength to combat disaster.

3.3 Gender Equality in Flash Flood Risk Management

Differentiating target groups: Gender-differentiated approaches are essential in all interventions with target group-related objectives. Whenever a response is associated with, or directed to, a particular target group, it will have different impacts on men and women, which must be addressed separately (FAO/WFP 2008).

Include women in pre- and post-disaster planning: Gender should be mainstreamed in any kind of disaster management activity in the community. Emergency planning must have the participation of women.

Keep women safe: Women’s safety is important in disaster risk management. Relief agencies must ensure women’s physical safety by creating safe spaces and facilities for women and the means to ensure their legal rights.

Protect girls’ education: Girls are more likely to miss school after a disaster. As soon as possible after a hazardous event occurs, special attention must be paid to girls’ education.

Target women’s health needs: Agencies and the CFFRMC itself must make special efforts to address the specific health needs of women in disaster situations. This includes providing suitable bathrooms, appropriate garments, sanitary supplies, and parental and maternity care. Psychological counselling for post-traumatic stress must be available to women and children.

Help women become self-sufficient: Women must be encouraged towards income generating activities. Special attention must be given to provide training on small-scale income generating activities.

Ensure equitable aid distribution: Very often women are deprived of aid distributions due to their limited mobility, physical limitations, and lack of proper access to information. Care must be taken to ensure that women have equal access to aid materials.

Bring women into all decision-making processes: For the long-term sustainability of plans for risk management, women should be encouraged to participate and even take leadership. Capacity building and advocacy trainings are important for women to increase their participation and leadership roles.

Points to keep in mind when engaging in gender analysis

- Gender is about women and men in relation to one another: the fact of being female or male plays a critical role in shaping vulnerabilities, first responses, information and sharing capacities, and access to decision-making.
- Communities and households are not made up of individuals with equal entitlements and access to resources (e.g., food, money, decision-making); understanding the structures of both is an essential component of gender analysis.
- Assumptions about what women and men do, their roles and responsibilities, should be examined rather than taken for granted. For instance, much of what women do is not considered 'work' because no remuneration is received for it.
- Class (social position, wealth), caste, age, and education also influence gender roles, responsibilities, access to resources and power. A poor woman's or man's needs and priorities are likely to be different from those of better-off men and women.
- Participatory approaches may not necessarily ensure that gender perspectives are taken into account; notions of wellbeing need to be based on a range of definitions given by local people.

(adapted from Mehta 2007a)

3.4 Disability Issues in Risk Reduction

Disabilities are part of diversity in human society. People have different physical and mental characteristics, different needs, and are differentially vulnerable during disasters. The so-called 'normal', non-disabled people created a discriminatory relationship with the disabled community, in which they are not tolerant of any limitations to the human body, intelligence level, or sensibility.

The usual belief is that these people are weak and dependent on the others. As a result, they remain the most vulnerable segment during disasters, as disaster risk management usually targets the 'average' person. The word average itself can have a different meaning depending on the location. For example, in Bangladesh 'average people' means Bengali Muslims, usually male. Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis, aboriginals, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, or small segments like the Ahmedia community people are not 'average'.

What may happen during a disaster?

A physically handicapped person may need additional support. The assisting equipment for a disabled person (e.g., crutches, hearing aid, spectacles, wheelchair, medicine) may be lost or damaged. He/she may need new or different types of materials or equipment. A visually impaired person may face problems proceeding to a shelter without assistance. During disasters, loudspeakers are often used to issue important warnings and instructions, but a hearing-impaired person may not hear them. Mentally challenged people require assistance so that they can be evacuated to a shelter safely. Most importantly, these people may not be able to communicate their problems effectively.

Some recommendations in addressing disability issues in flash flood management

In every disaster (including flash floods), disabled people face the most problems. Many of them cannot reach the shelters because of limited mobility, vision problems, and so on. They are also left out of receiving minimum relief materials. The CFFRMC and the evacuation and rescue team should take the following points into consideration during all stages of disaster risk management.

- Disabled people are usually excluded before any emergency. After the emergency, the situation deteriorates even further.
- Disabled people and people with special needs must be located in the social flood hazard mapping (SFHM) process (see Chapter 6). The nature of the impairment should be noted on the map.
- Ensure that techniques for search, evacuation, and so on consider the concerns of the disabled. The mentally disabled, physically challenged, blind, deaf, disabled children, women, and adolescents, each have their own needs. The CFFRMC and people of the community should take these differences into consideration.
- Ensure that the safety of disabled and other disadvantaged people is considered. For example, in shelters there is sometimes the risk of sexual harassment.
- Are the shelter and sanitation facilities easily accessible? User-friendly? High steps or high-placed houses may cause difficulties, particularly for elderly people, children, and the sick.
- Information disseminated using sound and recordings instead of posters will be more useful for the blind or non-literate.
- Audio, visual, and printed media should all be considered in providing information to people with special needs. Instead of a common modality, a needs-based approach to dissemination could be better suited to reach out to disabled people.
- Ensure mentally shocked or wounded persons receive psychological comfort.
- Usually relief operations give most attention to material assistance. The main items included in a relief package are generally cereals, canned food, clothes, and so on. But health and medical services, and supportive materials for the disabled should also be included.