

KEY POINTS

- A focus on gender equality in disaster risk management (DRM) is important because it strengthens overall resilience to disasters and leads to more equitable recovery.
- Bangladesh presents an interesting case as it has established a policy framework that recognizes the important roles of women in DRM. This framework includes a strong constitutional base, representation of women in DRM institutions, and a national plan for disaster management that strongly integrates gender equality and social inclusion.
- Bangladesh can reinforce its regional and global leadership in gender-responsive DRM by mainstreaming and implementing the gender equality actions in current DRM regulations and plans in the short term, while focusing on enhancing institutional arrangements to better address gender-specific disaster risks and needs in the medium term.

How Laws and Policies Support Gender-Responsive Disaster Risk Management in Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief is based on a rapid desk review and aims to provide an overview of laws and policies relevant to gender-responsive action on disasters and climate change in Bangladesh. It begins with a brief examination of the international context, followed by an overview of the constitutional provisions for gender equality in Bangladesh. It then offers a gender-focused analysis of key national laws and policies related to disasters, climate change, and the environment. The brief highlights how Bangladesh's legal and policy frameworks promote gender-responsive disaster risk management (DRM) and climate-related actions. It also identifies existing gaps in the policy landscape and implementation, recommending ways to address the challenges. It is intended as a quick reference for policymakers and gender advocates within Bangladesh as well as in other economies in the Asia and Pacific.

The geographic location of Bangladesh in the Ganges–Brahmaputra Delta and its low-lying coastal zones make the country highly exposed to a wide range of natural hazards, including cyclones, floods, riverbank erosion, and drought. These hazards can cause significant loss of life, damage to infrastructure, and displacement, exacerbating poverty and disrupting agriculture, the mainstay of the economy. Riverbank erosion leads to land loss and displacement, further straining resources. Climate change is intensifying these risks, leading to more unpredictable weather patterns and rising sea levels. The growing frequency and severity of extreme weather events make disaster preparedness and risk management critical for the country's resilience and sustainable development.

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In Bangladesh, as in other countries, gender differences play a significant role in shaping the risks and impacts of disasters, with women and girls often facing higher disaster risk than men.¹ These risks can arise from social and cultural norms that restrict women's access to resources, information, and decision-making processes, which can hinder their ability to prepare for and respond to disasters, or to access early warning systems and recovery resources.² Women are more likely to be responsible for caregiving roles, which limits their mobility during emergency evacuations and places an increased unpaid care burden on them during recovery,³ also impacting their economic recovery.⁴

Disasters exacerbate preexisting inequalities, with women facing heightened risks of gender-based violence,⁵ loss of livelihood, and barriers to accessing health care,⁶ particularly during displacement.⁷ For many women, the lack of property rights and access to credit also leaves them more vulnerable in the aftermath of disasters as they may struggle to secure recovery aid or rebuild their homes. These gendered impacts highlight the need for gender-responsive and inclusive DRM policies that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women, girls, and people of diverse genders in Bangladesh.

By implementing early warning systems, constructing resilient infrastructure like cyclone shelters, and promoting community-based preparedness programs, Bangladesh has significantly reduced loss of life,⁸ injuries, and property damage.⁹ The country's focus on preparedness, early action, and risk reduction is enabling it to mitigate the impacts of cyclones and floods, positioning Bangladesh as a leader in DRM globally.¹⁰

Bangladesh has effectively applied DRM laws and policies to reduce the impacts and risks associated with extreme weather events and environmental hazards by providing an expert decision-making agency with a national and local institutional framework, and budget to address impacts and risks. For example, enforcing building standards, conducting community preparedness drills and training volunteers (women and men), establishing early warning

systems, providing safe emergency shelters, ensuring coordinated response efforts during disasters, and coordinating recovery and reconstruction. These laws and policies have also become progressively more gender-responsive in composition and mandates. For example, while under the Disaster Management Act 2012, the National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) does not currently include the national Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA); the more recent Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) 2019 specifically includes the Secretary of the MoWCA in the Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee. The SOD acknowledges the need for gender and social inclusion training in emergency preparedness. The country's adoption of gender budget tracking since 2009 has also supported budget allocations and monitoring of expenditure on gender equality in DRM.¹¹

The legislation and policy base has evolved to include representation of women and certain mandates on gender equality in the DRM laws and policies (outlined below). However, women are still not well represented in the formal disaster management committees and civil service responsible for reducing risk and responding to disasters.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

Bangladesh is a signatory to key international frameworks that aim to ensure that DRM, climate change adaptation, and other development initiatives leave no one behind by considering the distinct needs, vulnerabilities, and human rights of women and marginalized groups. These include

- The [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\) 1992](#) and the [Paris Agreement 2015](#), as well as the [UNFCCC Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender and its Gender Action Plan \(GAP\)](#) that was reaffirmed at the 29th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP 29) in 2024.

¹ International Centre for Climate Change and Development. 2023. *Review of Implementation: Bangladesh's Climate Change Gender Action Plan (ccGAP)*. UN Women Bangladesh.

² Government of Bangladesh, Cabinet Division and General Economics Division of Bangladesh Planning Commission. 2020. *Gender Diagnostics, Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (DRAFT): For National Social Security Strategy of Bangladesh*. Social Security Policy Support Programme.

³ M. Mathew. 2019. *Unpaid Work in Asia and the Pacific*. *Social Development Policy Papers*. No. 2019/02. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

⁴ N. Sultana. 2022. *Understanding the Economic Dimensions of Women's Vulnerability During Cyclones: The Bangladesh Perspective*. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*. 70. 102730.

⁵ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 2016. Case Study 1: A Legacy of Cyclones: Bangladesh. In *Unseen, Unheard: Gender-Based Violence in Disasters—Asia-Pacific Case Studies*. pp. 17–40.

⁶ N. Sultana. Biological Dimensions of Women's Vulnerability in Cyclones: A Concern for Raising Self-Consciousness and Self-Worth in Case of Addressing Disaster Risk. Unpublished (Author's Copy, 2023); and S. Ayeb-Karlsson. 2021. *Mental Health Distress in the Wake of Bangladesh Cyclone Shows the Devastation of Climate-Related Loss and Damage*. *The Conversation*. 18 November.

⁷ Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. 2021. *National Strategy on Internal Displacement Management*.

⁸ U. Haque et al. 2012. *Reduced Death Rates from Cyclones in Bangladesh: What More Needs to Be Done?* *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 90 (2). pp. 150–156.

⁹ N. T. Rumpa, H. R. K. Real, and M. A. Razi. 2023. *Disaster Risk Reduction in Bangladesh: A Comparison of Three Major Floods for Assessing Progress Towards Resilience*. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*. 97. 104047.

¹⁰ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2020. *Disaster Risk Reduction in Bangladesh: Status Report 2020*. UNDRR Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

¹¹ Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, Finance Division. 2023. *Gender Budget Report 2023–24*. June.

- The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5: to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.
- The [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 \(Sendai Framework\)](#), which requires integration of gender considerations in disaster risk reduction, along with the [Gender Action Plan to Support Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 \(Sendai GAP\)](#), a technical document developed through consultations and finalized in 2024. The Sendai GAP includes 9 key objectives and 33 recommended actions for countries to choose from and adapt to their national priorities for gender equality in relation to disasters and climate change.
- The [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), which is a binding treaty Bangladesh ratified in 1984, affirming its obligation to promote gender equality. However, Bangladesh has maintained reservations to two critical provisions—Article 2, which calls for the elimination of all forms of discrimination through constitutional and legislative measures; and Article 16(1)(c), which pertains to equality in marriage and family matters. Despite these reservations, Bangladesh has integrated key elements of the CEDAW through its Constitution and national legislation. Additionally, the [CEDAW General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-Related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction in the Context of Climate Change](#), issued in 2018, directly addresses gender dimensions in disaster risk reduction, urging integration between gender policies and disaster management efforts.
- **Article 29.** Ensures equal opportunity in public employment, which is critical for women’s representation in decision-making bodies related to disaster management.
- **Article 40.** Protects the freedom to pursue any profession or occupation, ensuring that women cannot be legally barred from roles in DRM.
- **Article 42.** Confers the right to own property, an issue often complicated by local customs on inheritance and property ownership that can disadvantage women in post-disaster contexts.
- **Article 44.** Provides mechanisms for enforcing fundamental rights through the High Court, allowing for redress in cases where women’s rights are violated in the context of disaster risk reduction.

The Constitution sets out significant rights for women that are relevant to disasters and climate change, along with positive obligations for the State to reduce discrimination, as well as prohibitions on State institutions and private entities from directly or indirectly discriminating based on sex.

Gender Equality in Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Policies

Bangladesh has established a strong legislative and policy base for DRM. Building on the 2012 legislation, the government has progressively developed a gender-responsive policy and implementation framework over the last decade. This section outlines the key legislative and policy frameworks on DRM and climate change, focusing on how they provide a platform for more gender-responsive DRM and for the participation and empowerment of women. The boxed summaries highlight the key issues or good practices for each policy regarding gender equality in DRM.

Disaster Management Act 2012. The act established a structured framework for coordinated disaster preparedness and response, including the formation of the NDMC and other key institutions. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief is the government agency responsible for implementation and providing secretariat services to the NDMC.

This model for DRM has achieved many successes, and Article 27 of the Act prioritizes the needs of vulnerable populations, including women. However, it does not give specific guidance on how to ensure gender-responsive risk reduction. For example, the formation of the NDMC, comprising agency heads without specific provisions for representation of a women’s ministry or women’s organizations, reinforces existing inequalities because so few women have progressed to the head-of-agency level in the civil service. The NDMC also does not currently include the MoWCA, although it is represented in committees at the next level down.

POLICIES SUPPORTING GENDER EQUALITY IN BANGLADESH

Constitutional Articles Supporting Gender Equality

The [Constitution of Bangladesh](#) enshrines several provisions relevant to gender equality in DRM and climate change adaptation. These are important to highlight as the Constitution is the supreme law with which all other legislation and policy must comply, and its fundamental rights are directly enforceable. The relevant articles are

- **Article 27.** Guarantees equality before the law, an essential protection for women in accessing justice, particularly in cases of gender-based violence, and ensuring their property and housing rights during disaster recovery.
- **Article 28.** Clause 28(2) grants women equal rights with men in all spheres of public life, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex; whereas, Clause 28(4) authorizes the government to enact positive measures in favor of women and disadvantaged groups, a crucial component for addressing gender disparities in DRM.

The Disaster Management Act 2012 does not specifically provide for the representation of women or a focus on gender and social inclusion, but its scope is wide enough to include these issues in the policies and plans made for its implementation. At the next review of the Disaster Management Act, more specific inclusion of gender equality objectives and mechanisms for implementation could be added to strengthen the legal base for gender equality in disaster risk management.

Standing Orders on Disaster 2019. The SOD, made under the Disaster Management Act, provides detailed guidelines for committees, their composition and mandates, and the roles of ministries and other government agencies. It substantially mainstreams gender equality and gender-responsive DRM at both national and local levels. For example, the Secretary of the MoWCA is included in the Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee. The SOD acknowledges the need for gender and social inclusion training in emergency preparedness. At local levels, it mandates that committees ensure women's representation and address the safety and security of women and children during disasters. It also sets out comprehensive roles for gender-responsive DRM for the Ministry of Planning, the MoWCA, and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

The Standing Orders on Disaster 2019 is authorized under the Disaster Management Act 2012 and ensures substantial representation of women and institutional mandates on gender equality and social inclusion.

National Plan for Disaster Management 2021–2025. This plan integrates gender responsiveness as a crosscutting strategy, focusing on the participation of women in decision-making and addressing the vulnerabilities of women, children, and persons with disabilities. It stresses the importance of inclusive disaster recovery strategies, particularly given the increased risks posed by climate change.

The National Plan for Disaster Management 2021–2025 strongly integrates gender equality and social inclusion, building on the Disaster Management Act 2012 and the Standing Orders on Disaster 2019 to provide a strong platform for the National Disaster Management Council and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief to implement gender-responsive disaster risk management. Resources for implementation could be enhanced.

Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995. While this act provides a legal framework for environmental protection, it is largely gender-neutral. However, subsequent policies, such as the Gender Policy 2016 from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, address this by requiring the inclusion of gender equality goals in environmental governance. This is relevant to DRM due to the close links between matters such as river catchment and vegetation management and floods.

The Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995 does not specifically provide for the representation of women nor a focus on gender equality and social inclusion, but its scope is wide enough to include these issues in policies for its implementation. The Gender Policy 2016 of the environment sector is an example of how policy under the legislation provides more detailed guidance. However, the legal base for gender equality in environmental management could be strengthened when the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act is next reviewed by including gender equality objectives and mechanisms for implementation.

Gender Policy 2016 of the Department of Environment, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. The Gender Policy 2016 examines the proportion of men and women civil servants in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and the extent of their active participation across the agency's activities. The policy supports the integration of gender equality goals and objectives into organizational processes and structures. It also requires a Gender Analysis Framework for the implementation and monitoring of the policy. It refers to the CEDAW and the Constitution Articles 10, 19, and 28, indicating its objective of compliance with these articles. It notes that a key mechanism the government uses to do this is by including gender equality provisions in the national 5-year plans, and highlights that many chapters of the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) focused on gender issues, social inclusion, and social protection based on gender equality.

The environment sector's Gender Policy 2016 is an important component in addressing gender equality within the civil services and for capacity building. Although it is not a detailed plan with clear outcomes, its framing within the CEDAW and the Constitutional rights serves as a good practice model for gender equality mainstreaming in environmental management, including many aspects relevant to disaster risk management and climate change.

Climate Change and Gender Action Plan for Bangladesh (revised 2023). Initially developed in 2013, Bangladesh's Climate Change Gender Action Plan (ccGAP) aimed to ensure gender equality and social inclusion in climate change-related policies, strategies, and interventions. In 2023, Bangladesh Climate Change Trust and UN Women Bangladesh reviewed its achievements and compiled the lessons learned. The ccGAP was updated in 2023 with technical support from UN Women Bangladesh. The updated ccGAP provides action plans, measurable progress indicators, and stakeholder roles to facilitate sustainable inclusion.

The key objective of the national Climate Change Gender Action Plan is a gender transformative one, in that it aims to improve gender equality outcomes in Bangladesh through the policy and implementation actions on climate change, not only to prevent further inequality. It provides detailed actions and a strong focus on gender equality in action on climate change, serving as a good practice model for gender-responsive climate change policies in Bangladesh and other contexts. It complements the gender equality mandates in the disaster risk management and environmental laws and policies.

Overall, the legislative and policy base for DRM and climate change adaptation in Bangladesh provides strong basis for action to reduce risk, which has seen a progressive integration of gender equality provisions over the last decade or more.

CONCLUSIONS: STRENGTHENING GENDER INTEGRATION IN DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

This brief highlights the strengths and gaps of the Bangladesh law and policy framework for gender-responsive DRM and climate change, starting from the constitutional level and including the country's commitments to implement women's international human rights in the CEDAW, as well as key laws and policies on DRM, the environment, and climate change. The progressive inclusion and increasing detail of gender equality elements in policies offer a useful approach for other countries in the region that are seeking to increase gender-responsive DRM and promote women's leadership and participation. Legislation can provide the broad mandate, and the policies and operating procedures can often fill the detail. Nevertheless, the desk review undertaken for this brief highlights some gaps and areas that merit a stronger focus in Bangladesh—issues that are likely relevant to other countries with similar DRM frameworks, especially in South Asia.

Four focus areas are recommended for better mainstreaming of gender equality into DRM policies and actions in Bangladesh:

- (i) Develop gender-responsive multihazard early warning systems by incorporating gender equality indicators and ensuring that dissemination strategies are inclusive and accessible to all.
- (ii) Move beyond gender budget tracking by ensuring adequate planning, budgeting, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation mechanisms that support gender equality principles and gender-responsive DRM.
- (iii) Leverage the existing legal framework—from the Constitution to the Disaster Management Act and policies—to explicitly integrate the CEDAW obligations into DRM. This can include strengthening operational collaboration between the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and other institutions that are active in this sphere, such as the Ministry of Planning and the MoWCA.

- (iv) Enhance women's meaningful participation in DRM institutions by using legislative provisions to expand statutory committees to include the MoWCA and women's civil society organizations. The Disaster Management Act appears to allow for this, and there is constitutional authority to implement special measures under the CEDAW to address historical discrimination.

Further, three institutional actions are recommended as important and foundational steps to strengthen gender integration in DRM:

- (i) Include the MoWCA as a member of the NDMC, using the legislative powers under the Disaster Management Act to appoint additional members. Ensure the MoWCA is equipped with adequate resources and necessary capacity building to contribute actively to DRM.
- (ii) Adopt the [Sendai GAP](#) as the basis for planning gender equality and inclusion initiatives within disaster risk reduction and management between 2025 and 2030. Bangladesh has an opportunity to lead in implementing the Sendai GAP and gender-responsive disaster risk reduction, just as it has led in reducing disaster-related loss of life and injury. Key leadership areas include promoting women's inclusion in DRM governance and establishing effective gender-responsive early warning systems. While all objectives of the Sendai GAP are relevant, recommended actions are intended for Bangladesh's specific context.
- (iii) Ensure systematic collection and use of sex-disaggregated data and gender analysis to better understand the differing vulnerabilities, capacities, and needs of women and men in relation to disasters. This information is essential for designing effective strategies for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

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