



Disaster management in Bangladesh

What women need



Thank you to the 50 inspiring women leaders from Batighata and Sharankhola upazillas for sharing their ideas, hopes, and dreams with ACIDI/VOCA and UN Women Bangladesh, and for the support of USAID and the Royal Norwegian Embassy.

Who We Are

UN Women was established in 2010 to accelerate progress on achieving women's rights, and is a global champion for women and girls. Through its *Reducing Vulnerability of Women Affected by Climate Change through Viable Livelihood Options* programme, UN Women Bangladesh is working with the government, Bangladesh Climate Change Trust, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, BRAC, and other NGO partners to ensure that legislation, policies, and strategies to strengthen women's economic empowerment and access to resources, are in place. At a grassroots level UN Women, together with BRAC, are supporting women to build micro-enterprises and green businesses through training and livelihood inputs.

UN Women also targets policymakers and forums in the disaster management, climate change, environment and social protection sectors that are discussing the country's development framework and making sure they have access to the necessary knowledge and technical expertise to address the needs of women affected by climate change.

ACDI/VOCA implements USAID's Office of Food for Peace's five-year programme to reduce food insecurity among vulnerable households in the Khulna Division in south-west Bangladesh. This funding is supplemented by a contribution from the Government of Bangladesh. The Program for Strengthening Household Access to Resources (PROSHAR) is an integrated initiative that improves livelihoods, increases local knowledge of and access to quality basic health and nutrition services, and strengthens the capacity of institutions and households to respond effectively to shocks caused by rapid-onset natural and chronic disasters. It is implemented in collaboration with Project Concern International (PCI), International Development Enterprises (iDE), and three local non-government organizations (NGOs).

What We Did

In August 2015, UN Women Bangladesh and ACIDI/VOCA jointly organised a Women's Think Tank for women in Batiaghata and Sharankhola *upazillas*. The Batiaghata and Sharankhola *upazillas*, located in the Khulna Division, are part of the coastal belt of Bangladesh, where cyclones, storm surges, salinity intrusion, and coastal erosion are common. The coastal belt has been identified as a problem area due to different climatic disasters, complex hydro-geological conditions, and adverse water quality, which make water supply difficult. The coastal belt, especially exposed areas and islands, are the most hard-to-reach and hazard-prone areas in Bangladesh.

The Think Tank brought together 50 women leaders - those that UN Women and ACIDI/VOCA have engaged with through their respective programmes - to further understand the challenges and opportunities of rural women in severely climate-affected areas of Bangladesh. The Think Tank enabled women leaders to discuss, and share experiences on resilience, disaster preparedness, and climate change, and created an informal network for women to connect and support each other.



“During the 1988 floods, there was no relief system. For a few days after the flood, everyone shared what little food they had. The young men of the community came together and tried to help affected families to rebuild their houses. Today, things are different. We get help from NGO’s, from the government, and also the percentage of educated people in society is increasing. We receive information and assistance before disaster, during and after disaster. The situation has changed a lot.”

- Aorty Bioragi



“I started having labour pains during the 1988 floods. I was confused whether I should work to protect my house from the storm, or have my baby. Suddenly, I gave birth and I passed out. After three days I regained consciousness. Pregnant women are still in danger when they give birth in shelters, as we don’t have experienced midwives or doctors to assist.”

– Beby Nazmin



“My husband was disabled. Half his body was paralysed. During Cyclone Sidr in 2007, the storm came suddenly. I wasn’t able to take him myself to the shelter, so he was left behind. He died.”

– Hosnara Begum



“Ever since I started working two years ago, my whole life has changed. I was able to pay off loans that we had, and now I don’t borrow money, or lend money to others. I look after my husband, my family, and my small poultry farm. And people respect me. They speak well with me, and about me.”

– Aaroty Sarker

What It Means

In Bangladesh, women and girls generally tend to be the main victims of natural disasters. This is due to ongoing gender inequalities such as constraints on female mobility, which can hinder access to early warning, and delay early action, and an increase in violence against women which means women and girls may be reluctant to seek shelter. Post-disaster women have different needs from men because of gender differences in roles and resources. Relief and recovery should address women's real situation but can also help strengthen their capacity and improve their position. This is possible through increasing their decision-making power (for example, through cash transfers), and maintaining access to income-generating activities, not only for the revenue, but also social standing and influence.

To best support women before, during, and after disaster periods, in the south-west of Bangladesh, a number of key issues need to be addressed by government bodies and NGOs working in these areas.

Key Recommendations

- 1** Ensure the participation of women in developing community-based early information and warning systems (including education and communication activities), that use local resources and knowledge, including formal and informal dissemination avenues, especially for at-risk groups or individuals.
- 2** Promote the engagement of women in community-based disaster management structures to ensure facilities and processes in emergency shelters are sensitive to women's needs for privacy, security and protection of assets.
- 3** Provide female physicians and counsellors for women, ensuring they have access to sexual and reproductive health information. Female counsellors can provide psychosocial support for women, and women that may be affected by domestic violence at home or in emergency shelters. Advocate for the safety of these groups.
- 4** Consult with women to ensure any relief provided meets their needs and is socially and culturally appropriate. Consider cash transfers as a way to allow flexibility in household recovery.
- 5** Encourage women's employment through participation in disaster recovery, increasing their income-generating and skills capacity.



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