

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 ACDI/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 ACDI/VOCA jointly organised a Women's Think Tank for women in Batiaghata and Sharankhola *upazillas*. The Batiaghta 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 ACDI/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.



What They Said

EARLY INFORMATION

Access to information, before, during and after disaster is vital for communities in safeguarding lives and livelihoods. Many communities are equipped with this information through formal Union Disaster Management Committee structures, but many households miss out due to a range of factors, including geographic isolation.

Women's lack of mobility in public spaces and hence, social isolation, can result in women not receiving early warnings (either not at all, or not in time). Their lack of decision-making power around what to do with this information, or in times of disaster, exacerbates women's greater vulnerability to climate change and disasters, compared to men.

Although access to traditional media channels (print, broadcast) is limited in these areas, many women expressed the need for more informative and participatory programming on disaster preparedness. Clear, consistent messaging through mainstream media channels can decrease the spread of misinformation, and increase access to information to marginalised groups (for example through subtitled programming for the hearing impaired).

Folk media should also be recognised as an important resource, especially for the 39 percent of Bangladeshis that remain illiterate. Folk art, discourses by respected religious leaders, or *Baul* singers, can all carry relevant messages on awareness, historical and traditional identity, and moral value systems in disaster.



SHELTERS

Safe spaces for women

Violence also contributes to women's increased vulnerability compared to men in the context of climate change and disasters. Violence is a reality of most Bangladeshi women's lives; 87 percent of ever-married women have experienced some form of violence (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2013).

Following natural disasters, the threat of physical and sexual violence often increases; for example, in moving to, and inside emergency shelters. A 2008 study found that 71.6 percent of women were subject to more violence during disasters. Married women mentioned an increase specifically in physical and psychological forms of violence. Sexual harassment including forced sex, rape at home and in shelters were also reported by women and girls. Many women and girls do not take refuge in shelters during disasters due to a lack of personal security. This sexual violence can have long-term impacts on the health of women and girls affected, including increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy.

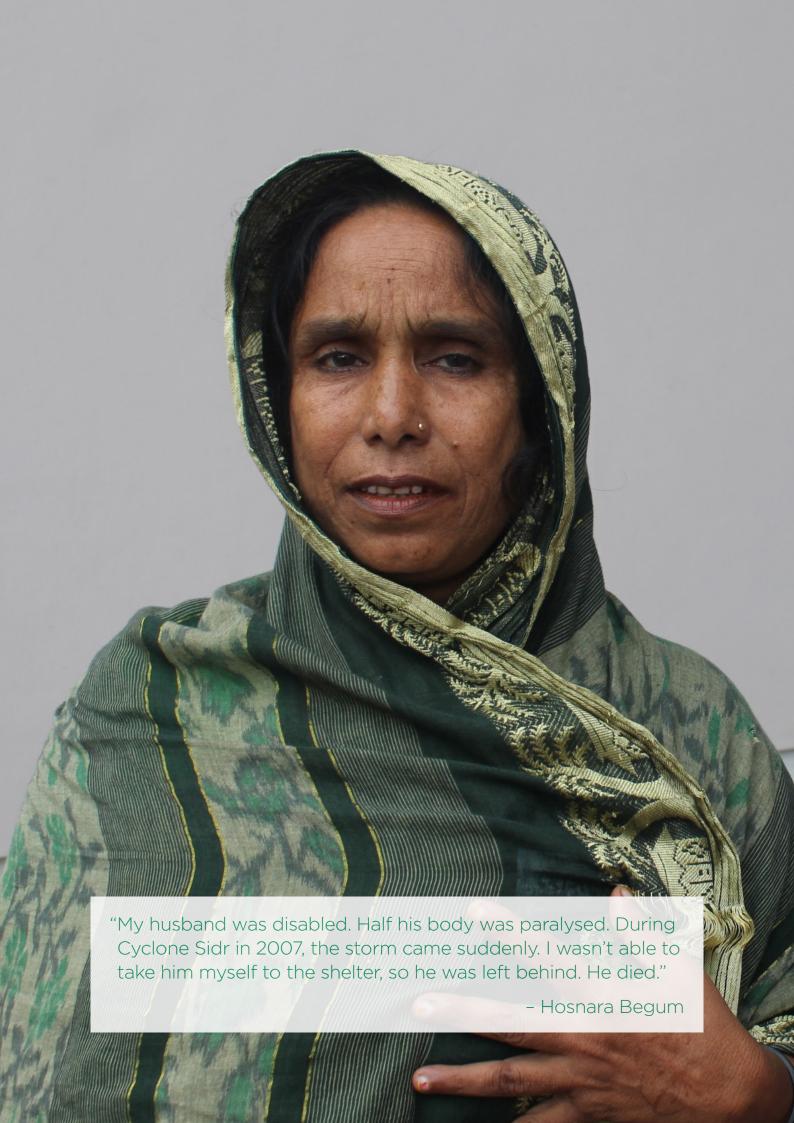
Thus, creating safe spaces for women in emergency shelters is critical. The absence of gender-segregated spaces creates further health and hygiene concerns, such as menstruation, and the safety and dignity of pregnant women. Facilities for pregnant women at shelters is severely lacking, and many women give birth in the shelters without adequate medical care and support.

It is particularly important for pregnant women to have access to female medical personnel at emergency shelters. As their mobility may be restricted, and cultural norms may not allow them to be examined by male physicians, access to appropriate personnel and facilities is vital to ensure that women do not miscarry, or deliver babies in unsanitary or unsafe conditions, which may lead to birth complications.

The design of emergency shelters should take into account privacy for female members of households, including secure doors and adequate lighting. Cooking, bathing and toilet arrangements also need to be adequate, safe, and culturally appropriate. Separate areas for washing and drying menstruation cloths, and appropriate medical facilities for pregnant women should be in place.

Disability inclusion

While the availability of, and access to, cyclone shelters has improved for households generally, there is one group whose access remains restricted. Households where one member of the family suffers from a physical or mental disability, have to rely on the support of other family members, neighbours or friends to move safely during periods of evacuation and disaster recovery.



POST-DISASTER RECOVERY AND COORDINATION

The development of disaster coordination systems within Bangladesh has improved the relief that affected families receive. But in the wake of a disaster, with incomegenerating resources affected, it is difficult for many people to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. As well as relief items (including food and non-food items), cash transfers are needed in the recovery process.

The use of cash as an alternative or complement to commodity assistance is increasing in emergency responses. It allows beneficiaries the autonomy to prioritise and organize their own household recovery, giving them choices between immediate needs such as food, water, and rebuilding homes, to investing in long-term priorities such as school or healthcare. The use of cash also broadens women's opportunities to manage their household recovery within local communities, instead of voucher-based systems which may affect women with restricted mobility receiving relief items.

However, distributing and monitoring cash transfers requires caution. Decisions about how cash is spent and who makes those decisions may create conflict within households.



HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED

Women today are more prepared and informed than their mothers and grandmothers were 20 years ago. Successive generations have built on the information, education and communication delivered to communities, and benefitted. Although many issues remain in reducing the vulnerability of women during disasters, this generation of women are more confident, knowledgeable and resourceful than ever before.

Influence and decision-making

For many women, influence in families and communities, and the ability to make decisions depends on their ability to earn an income. Their income-generating ability allows them mobility, a say in household decisions about expenditure, and clout in communities which allows them to give advice to others, and ask for help when they need it.

Maintaining access to sources of income post-disaster is important in preserving the influence and decision-making ability of women. In the case of lost or unviable livelihoods following disasters, access to training and capacity building, such as advice on improving agricultural practices will be key for women.

Mobility

Women's mobility in their communities has vastly increased over the years. Women are now more mobile than ever before, through income-generating work, NGO activities that have them interacting within their communities, and representation on Union Disaster Management Committees. But this newfound freedom also has its challenges: many women present in public places such as roads or markets are often harassed by men.

In disaster situations, women now feel more confident to move freely., than in previous disaster situations They are able to wear clothing that does not restrict their movement, and are able to run and swim to safety. But women with limited physical mobility, such as the pregnant, disabled or elderly, may need help accessing emergency shelters or may need relief aid transported to them. This situation can be compounded when women face multiple mobility constraints, such as *purdah* (a religious and social practice of female seclusion), safety concerns, or damaged clothing that makes it difficult for them to leave the house.

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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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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