Women's Voices & Agencies in Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction

Facilitating Factors & Constraints from the Experiences of the Afghanistan Resilience Consortium

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March 2019

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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

This technical paper on women's voices and agencies in community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) draws on the Gender-Focused Situation Analysis carried out in project sites of the members of the Afghanistan Resilience Consortium (ARC). The ARC has been implementing the DFID-supported *Strengthening Resilience of Vulnerable Communities in Afghanistan Against Disaster* (SRACAD) project since 2014. This project, rooted in a CBDRR approach, is implemented by the ARC[1] in 705 communities across nine provinces of Afghanistan. Based on the guiding principles of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR), the central theme of the project is to "leave no one behind" by reaching out through an "all-of-society" approach for advancing the agenda of CBDRR. These principles very clearly underpin the imperative of inclusion of hitherto invisible and marginalised groups experiencing multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities – i.e. age, disability, ethnicity, class, marital status, minority and displacement status – with gender cutting across them all. Gender inclusion with all its intersecting dimensions is embedded in the now widely recognised fact that, for communities to become resilient, it is a prerequisite that the gender-based vulnerabilities of women – who constitute half of society – are analysed, addressed, and finally transformed into capacities.

This paper brings to the foreground the voices and agency of women as factors that turn gender-based vulnerabilities into capacities. If resiliencies are a function of capacities, then the existence and strength of the agency and voices of women are robust indicators of the degree to which they have attained resilience (in this context, against disasters). The paper focuses on women because, as will be clearly highlighted, they remain most vulnerable to disasters because of their marginalisation in socio-cultural, political, economic and other arenas.

1. Background and Context

Afghanistan's geography varies from high mountains in the north-east and centre, to arable plains in the north and desert in the south-west. It has an arid, continental climate with cold, harsh winters and hot summers. Mean annual precipitation is approximately 300 mm, but there is considerable variation across the country in precipitation from 60 mm in the south-west to 1,200 mm in the north-east[2].

Afghanistan's population is predominantly rural, and 60 percent of Afghans are primarily reliant on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods[3]. Formally, women constitute more than 40 percent

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[1] The ARC comprises five international organisations: ActionAid, AfghanAid, Concern Worldwide, Save the Children, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). All members except UNEP are implementing partners at the field level; UNEP provides technical support in research and capacity building.

[2] UNEP. 2008. *Biodiversity Profile of Afghanistan*.

[3] CSO. 2016. *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2013–14: National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment*.

of the agricultural labour force[4], but this figure does not include women's contributions in unpaid work[5]. Moreover, women are most often involved in lower levels of agricultural value chains and small-scale production because inequitable access to opportunities[6]. As small-scale farmers, women are extremely vulnerable to hazards and climate change as they have limited options for diversifying their production base and thus spread their risk over multiple income sources[7].

The overall humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is amongst the worst in the world, with over 70 percent of the country's population having been displaced by conflict at least once in their lifetimes, and only 30 percent of the population being considered food secure[8]. This is further compounded by the fact that the country is extremely vulnerable to natural hazards and climate change because of the rugged landscape and arid climate. Moreover, the high dependence on agriculture and natural resources means that rural livelihoods are extremely sensitive to the impacts of climate change and hazards.

1.1. Overview of Natural Hazards in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's diverse geography and variable climate mean that the distribution of hazards is not uniform across provinces nor in terms of seasonal and annual variability. These hazards impact different groups of people in different ways, based on their unique socio-economic and environmental contexts. Therefore, assessing and addressing vulnerability to hazards should be contextualised using participatory, inclusive approaches that facilitate the vocalisation by vulnerable groups of their challenges, priorities and needs, as well as allowing them to exercise their agencies to have these needs met. This needs to be predicated upon a good understanding of the risks posed by such hazards.

Seasonal and flash floods regularly occur because of localised extreme precipitation events as well as from snow run-off during spring and summer. This flooding causes human fatalities, damage to property and infrastructure, destruction of agricultural crops and lands, death of livestock and disruption of rural livelihoods. **Droughts** occur periodically because of variable and insufficient precipitation, constrained access to water, and mismanagement of water resources. These droughts impact millions of people, particularly those relying on rain-fed cultivation of grains and staple crops as well as livestock owners also suffer considerable losses. **Landslides** tend to have more localised impacts, especially where deforestation, soil erosion and land degradation has destabilised hillsides and slopes. The impacts of landslides are severe when houses, infrastructure and agricultural lands are located in vulnerable areas. The mountainous nature of large areas of Afghanistan and large amount of precipitation that falls as snow in winter means that **avalanches** pose a serious threat to many local communities. Afghanistan also experiences regular **earthquakes** because of its location straddling the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates[9]. In the recent past, earthquakes have caused considerable damage to buildings and infrastructure,

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[4] MAIL. 2015. *National Strategy on Women in Agriculture (2015–2020)*.

[5] AREU & UN Women. 2013. *Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan, 2002-2012: Information Mapping and Situation Analysis*.

[6] World Bank. 2011. *Understanding gender in agricultural value chains: The cases of grapes/raisins, almonds and saffron in Afghanistan*.

[7] Ochieng *et al*. 2016. Effects of climate variability and change on agricultural production: The case of small scale farmers in Kenya. *NJAS - Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences* 77: 71–78.

[8] WFP. 2012. *Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods Survey*.

[9] Wheeler *et al*. 2005. *Seismotectonic Map of Afghanistan, with Annotated Bibliography*. Open-File Report 2005–1264.

while also frequently resulting in injuries and loss of life. **Extreme temperatures**, whether very high temperatures in summer or very low temperatures in winter, are regularly experienced because of Afghanistan's diverse geography and weather patterns. These extremes pose particular threats to groups such as pregnant women, the elderly, young, and infirm, as well as adversely affecting agricultural productivity and animal health. All of the above hazards are expected to be compounded by **climate change**, which will exacerbate their impacts as increased temperatures and changing precipitation will increase the frequency and severity of hazards[10].

The impacts of these hazards on the people of Afghanistan are considerable. Globally, the country ranked second in terms of fatalities caused by disasters between 1980 and 2015, with 50 percent of the national mortality rate resulting from geo-physical and weather-related hazards[11]. In 2019, an estimated 3–4 million people are expected to be directly affected by natural hazards[12]. The high rate of losses and damages is caused by the high exposure and extreme vulnerability of Afghans and their livelihoods and assets to hazards. Drivers such as decades of conflict, environmental degradation, poverty, unemployment, migration and adverse land-tenure have led to many settlements, infrastructure and productive assets being located in high-risk areas, while there are generally low levels of planning and preparedness to reduce risk from and adequately respond to hazards[13]. Hazard events thus frequently turn into disasters with considerable humanitarian and socio-economic consequences. Furthermore, such disasters often exacerbate the challenges caused by the ongoing conflict and instability, creating new risks and adding new stresses in situations with already weak coping capacities.

1.2. Impacts of Natural Hazards on Women in Afghanistan

The provision of emergency aid to disaster-affected communities is essential to saving lives and addressing humanitarian needs. Preparatory actions taken before hazards occur – known as disaster risk reduction (DRR) – mitigate the impacts of such hazards by reducing exposure and vulnerability of people and property as well as by improving preparedness and early warning systems[14]. However, determining which DRR actions to take necessitates a nuanced understanding of the local context and how diverse agents and factors interact and can be mobilised to reduce vulnerability and exposure. This is because hazards and disasters have social as well as physical dimensions, impacting different people in different ways depending on personal, cultural, socio-economic, environmental and other factors. The impact of disasters depends on the nature and intensity of the event, but in all cases the impact varies according to the degree of vulnerability of the social groups affected.

Gender equality entails substantial and equitable participation of women and men in decision-making, exercising their rights, access to resources and development benefits; indeed, in all aspects of peoples' lives and livelihoods[15,16]. The reality is that women tend to have weak voices and agencies when it comes

[10] Aich, V. & Khoshbeen, A.J. 2016. Afghanistan: Climate Change Science Perspectives.

[11] World Bank. 2017. *Disaster Risk Profile: Afghanistan*.

[12] OCHA. 2018. *Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan January 2018 – December 2021: 2019 Update*.

[13] UNEP. 2002. *Afghanistan Post-Conflict Environmental Impact Assessment*.

[14] UNISDR. (n.d.). *What is Disaster Risk Reduction?* Available at: http://www.unisdr.org/who-we-are/what-is-drr

[15] Oxfam. 2010. *Gender, Disaster Risk Reduction, and Climate Change Adaptation: A Learning Companion*.

[16] World Bank, FAO & IFAD. 2015. *Gender in Climate-smart Agriculture: Module 18 for the Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

to decision-making. Gender inequality affects all societies, particularly in the context of developing countries, and it channels access to social and economic resources away from women and towards men. Women are thus severely affected by disasters because they occur in contexts structured by gender and power relations cutting across different institutional sites[17]. Disaster events impact women disproportionately, endangering girls' and women's personal safety, income sources, livelihood resources, environmental and economic assets, mental and physical health, future opportunities, social networking, and, too often, life itself[18]. Post-disaster mortality, injury, and illness rates are often higher for girls and women than boys and men. Loss of agricultural work for women farmers, disruption of home-based industries, and low access to the financial and material aid are greater for women compared to their male counterparts. Relocation after disasters increases women's workloads, decreases their control over food and income, and disrupts their social support networks, i.e., friends, relatives, and neighbours, on whom they depended for practical and psychological support[19].

Gender relations severely limit the ability of women to respond to disasters. The less economic, political and cultural power women enjoy before an event, the greater their suffering in the aftermath. Gendered vulnerabilities, compounded by other factors such as ethnicity, occupation, location, age, disability, minority status and displacement, influence the differential impact between women and men. Similarly, lack of agency prevents them from taking quick decisions, without the permission of male members on when, where and how to evacuate to the safer sites. The vulnerability of single mothers, widows, or elderly women remains especially evident, reinforcing the familiar notion of women as economic and emotional dependents – in other words, victims. As a group, women-headed households are economically and politically disadvantaged and have acute needs and reduced resources when disaster strikes their homes. Low income women whose earnings are essential for family survival may die in floods when they "choose" to remain in their homes to protect precious livestock or goods. Some cultural practices and social norms put women at special risk during and after disasters. They can make women vulnerable because they have less access to male-dominated evacuation shelters or because socio-cultural norms enforce women's dependence upon men for advanced warning and preparedness information. Early warning systems often fail to reach women because men are more likely to have multiple channels of acquiring information as they spend most of their time in public spaces, while women are usually too busy with domestic tasks. In a highly sex-segregated society, warning information is transmitted in public places where men congregate on the assumption that this would be communicated to the rest of the family, which by and large may not occur. Childcare and household responsibilities keep women at home, affecting their reach to or influence on early warning. Women are thus at a greater risk of perishing, likely with their children, while they wait for their husbands to return home and take them to safety. Mortality and morbidity, loss of livelihoods and the recovery period, the intensity of impacts of damage to vital infrastructure (such as hospitals and schools, roads and bridges, and drinking water sources) are consequently determined differentially along the gender lines. The intersecting determinants of vulnerabilities intensify the severity of differential impact of 'natural hazards turning into disasters' on

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[17] Blaikie *et al*. 1994. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*.

[18] Thorat, M. 2008. Gender Budgeting in Disaster Relief: Need for a New Methodology. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(17).

[19] Schwoebel, M.H. & Menon, G. 2004. *Mainstreaming gender in disaster management support project*.

women and girls. Moreover, during and after disasters and conflicts, the fear and actual incidence of violence against women and girls are likely to increase, resulting in a secondary disaster for them[20].

Restrictive socio-cultural norms ensure that women have less mobility, and inferior access to education, resources, skills, and earning opportunities. Consequently, women have weaker voices and poorer or no ownership rights, leading to limited agencies to shape the DRR agenda in their communities in the ways that they decide on critical attributes of gendered vulnerabilities and resiliencies. These gender divisions are pervasive and constrain women from accessing social and economic resources compared to the access enjoyed by men. Disasters thus impact men and women differently because of these gendered power relations that shape everyday realities[21,22]. For example, women are less likely to possess survival skills such as swimming, climbing and knowledge of technology, as cultural restrictions define what knowledge and skills they can or cannot attain. Since our argument is that less access to resources, in the absence of other compensations to provide safe conditions, leads to increased vulnerability, we contend that in general women are more vulnerable to hazards[23].

The situation concerning gender equality in Afghanistan is particularly difficult, as women experience high levels of gender-based violence, low levels of literacy, constrained mobility and restricted access to public spaces[24,25]. In this context, women's roles, rights, capacities, vulnerabilities and priorities are often unrecognised, undervalued and their voices are not heard. Consequently, Afghan women tend to be impacted disproportionally by hazards through injuries, fatalities and disruption of livelihoods, usually because of limited access to information and early warnings, constrained involvement in decision-making and planning, and restricted participation in the public sphere. This is also the case in the case of DRR and preparedness for coping with hazards. While women's contributions to community resilience are invaluable and they bring unique experiences and skills to DRR, such as being providers and primary care-givers and income earners[26], these contributions are rarely acknowledged or explored[27]. Building meaningful resilience to hazards and climate change will not bring tangible benefits without bridging such gaps between and amongst men and women by ensuring that both genders have equitable access to information, resources and decision-making opportunities. Only by allowing women's voices to be heard and their agencies to be exercised can there be effective identification of pathways to resilience-building, reduction of hazard risks and strengthening of adaptive capacity to climate change.

The vulnerabilities of women are related to neglect and under-recognition of the capacities with which they manage their families ordinarily as well as in times of crisis, whether disasters or conflicts. Lack of agency and voice are attributes of exclusion that denote high degrees of vulnerabilities among social groups. The solution, then, is inclusion by creating circumstances that enhance capacities, skills, and

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[20] Bradshaw, S. & Fordham, M. 2014. Double Disaster: Disaster through a Gender Lens. In: Collins *et al*. (eds). *Hazards, Risks and Disasters in Society*.

[21] Ariyabandu, M.M. & Wickramasinghe, M. 2003. *Gender Dimensions in Disaster Management: A Guide for South Asia*.

[22] Pincha, C. 2008. *Indian Ocean Tsunami through The Gender Lens: Insights from Tamil Nadu, India*.

[23] Enarson, E. & Morrow, B.H. 1998. *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes.*

[24] Nijhowne, D. & Oates, L. 2008. *Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan*.

[25] Afghanistan. 2011. *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Afghanistan Combined initial and second periodic report*. CEDAW/C/AFG/1-2.

[26] Oxfam. 2010. *Gender, Disaster Risk Reduction, and Climate Change Adaptation: A Learning Companion*.

[27] UNESCAP. 2017. *Gender, the Environment and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific*. Sales No.E.17.II.F.18.

agencies and voices of the most marginalised with an awareness that within a given group some are more vulnerable than others. DRR/CBDRR projects then direct their activities to create expanded spaces for enhancing the capacities of such marginalised groups so that they become effective first responders when natural hazards turn into disasters. In this paper, we direct our attention to women, one of the most marginalised groups, in relation to how far their voices and agency was able to influence project activities and outcomes on the one hand, and to what extent the project elements created pathways for community resilience by strengthening women's voices and agencies.

2. The Afghanistan Resilience Consortium and SRACAD

The ARC leverages the experiences, relationships, and reputations of member organisations as a driving force for reducing disaster risk and building resilience in rural Afghan communities. Conflict, environmental mismanagement, poverty and frequent disasters combined with limited institutional capacities to plan for and address hazards puts people, lands, and infrastructure in harm's way and threatens to undermine development gains. The ARC believes that the integration of climate change, DRR and resilience is a national priority for Afghanistan and that action should be taken at the global, national and local levels to address vulnerabilities to disasters. To coherently and cohesively address the root causes of vulnerabilities to natural hazards and climate change, member organisations created the ARC in 2014. In March 2015, the ARC launched its flagship SRACAD project that seeks to enhance the resilience of communities to the impacts of hazards and climate change and build the capacity of government institutions to adequately plan for and respond to disasters.

For resilience to disasters to become sustainable, the ARC believes that it is a fundamental necessity to ensure the effective inclusion of socially-marginalised groups, including the extremely poor, women, persons with disability, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable groups. The SRACAD project thus seeks to ensure that the most marginalised and at-risk members of society are more effectively considered in risk assessment, disaster mitigation, disaster planning and response, thus saving lives and stemming displacement and migration.

This technical paper on women's voices and agencies in CBDRR is thus a reflection on the successes of the ARC's approaches to reducing vulnerabilities using an all-of-society approach in recognition of the fact that building resilient communities cannot be achieved without meaningful and equitable participation of all community members. At the same time, it also underscores constraints on women's voices and agencies and, while analysing them, provides insights as to how addressing such constraints, the ARC members and other stakeholders can impart substance to both.

SECTION II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SITUATION ANALYSIS

3. Need and Purpose

The need for the Situation Analysis was felt because of the growing realisation that it was imperative for the ARC to undertake a reality check as to whether the SRACAD project's interventions were:

- laying the basis for the substantial participation women in CBDRR activities;
- actively integrating their priorities in CBDRR activities;
- paving the way for them to have easier access to and ownership of resources related to reducing their disaster risk;
- addressing their socially-constructed vulnerabilities and gender-specific needs; and
- enhancing their capacities to respond to disasters with a high degree of resilience.

The overall purpose of the Situation Analysis was thus to gain insights into the factors which facilitated the creation of pathways for women's voices and agencies to influence decision-makers, and in relation to the project, for course correction. Folded into this overall purpose was the additional aim of tracking the barriers to creation of these pathways to determine how such barriers could be removed.

4. Conceptual Framework

The operational definition of agency and voice in this paper follows that of the World Bank concerning *Promoting Women's Agency*[28]. The following four attributes were adopted to explore the findings of this Situation Analysis in terms of women's agencies and voices:

1) *Access to and ownership/decision-making over the resources* – Measured by the degree of independence with which women were able to access resources provided by the project and to decide on how, when, and where to convert the resources into meaningful activities or states[29]. Also measured by the ways in which women were able to influence the medium through which they obtained such access (through men or through women representatives).

2) *Enhanced mobility* – Measured by the degree to which conditions enhance women's mobility and ability to negotiate with cultural norms through investing resources or introducing women sensitive practices/infrastructure.

3) *Freedom from the perceived or actual risk of violence* – Measured by the degree of women's threat perceptions compared to men's perceptions and the actual occurrence of violence because of women's active engagement and articulations in the public space.

4) *Ability to have a voice in society and influence policy* — Measured by the extent of women's participation and representation in formal institutions and engagement in collective action and associations. Also measured by the existence of conditions for enhanced women's leadership in CBDRR processes.

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[28] Chapter 4. Promoting Women's Agency. In: World Bank. 2011. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*.

[29] Khanh That Ton *et al.* 2019. Expanding the capabilities of people with disabilities in disaster risk reduction. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 34: 11–17.

5. Methodology

The Situation Analysis followed a qualitative methodology with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather primary information from the field. Analyses of secondary literature – mainly analysis of the Community-Based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) plans of the sites visited – were also undertaken under the framework of understanding women's agencies and voices. A total of twenty FGDs – eight with men's groups and eleven with women's groups – were conducted in twelve communities across **four provinces-Samangan, Bamyan, Balkh, and Jawzjan.** While the sample is not a representative one, as a theoretically-informed sample it does capture the authentic experiences of women. The women interviewed believed that their lives and voices were representative of those of many other women. This research method allowed the Situation Analysis to capture key facilitating factors and constraints which either enhanced or constricted women's agencies and voices for resilience-building interventions. Because the interviews explored facts and the perspectives of respondents, they have provided a snapshot to gain a basic understanding of whether interventions strengthened the voices and agencies of women to influence the disaster preparedness agenda in favour of their critical needs and priorities. It was assumed that if a profile of constraints and facilitating factors could emerge from this action research, it would help the project proponents to recalibrate the way in which women were engaged in various project elements[30].

Also, by comparing the results of in-depth interviews from diverse communities, it was possible to generalise the findings to inform decision-makers at the project level, and by extension policy-makers, concerning the role of women's voices and agencies in CBDRR. This Situation Analysis revealed the degree to which women were aware and capable of exercising their agencies to bring into consideration their perceptions of risks, vulnerabilities and capacities in relation to how natural hazards turn into disasters[31]. It is hoped that these evidence-based data will contribute to a better understanding of the DRR-related issues that Afghan women face as well as the good practices that worked to strengthen their voices and enhance their agencies.

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[30] The major project elements at the grassroots level were: formation of CBDMCs and School-Based Disaster Management committees; HVCAs to inform the development of CBDP and School-Based Disaster Preparedness plans; small-scale disaster mitigation structures; tree plantations and vegetable gardens in home yards; watershed management; cash-for-work; capacity building, especially for life-saving and S&R skills; and distribution of CERT, S&R and First Aid kits.

[31] The author believe in and subscribe to the view that disasters are not natural but a result of the interaction between natural hazards and socially-created vulnerabilities.

SECTION III: FACILITATING FACTORS AND CONSTRAINTS

6. Facilitating Factors: Pathways for Women's Voices and Agencies

This section presents the efforts made by the ARC members to create an enabling environment for the emergence of women's voice and agencies in CBDRR to achieve community resilience in an inclusive and gender-just way. These are pathways towards a destination; the paths may not yet be clear and straight as women gather together to walk them, but the pathways hold the promise of the cherished destination of gender equality in all spheres. The journey may be slow, but it has started. This section comprises evidence from the field that sheds light on the beginnings that have been made but are yet to be cemented into multiple paths where one can walk without fear, with a sense of empowerment, and where voices and agencies feed on each other.

6.1. Discourse On and Efforts Towards Equal Representation of Women

Information from the SRACAD field sites reveals that there were definite efforts to have equal representation of women in the Community-Based Disaster Management Committees (CBDMCs) and other bodies established under the project[32]. If the representation was not equal, it was assumed that women's participation would not fall below 33 percent. This norm was institutionalised in the criteria for selection of the members for the committees. While such criteria were met in two out of the four provinces, the number fell short of even 33 percent in some communities in the other two.

The very fact that a discourse around equal representation was asserted and reasserted enhanced the confidence of women and girls on the one hand, and gained a wider acceptance in the communities of women's participation on the other. The legitimacy of women's representation in the matters of DRR, an emerging field for the communities, expanded the opportunities for women to gain information, skills and access to resources such as Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and First Aid kits in what was hitherto considered as being men's domain:

> "Search and rescue was never considered a woman's domain, although women informally do both when a disaster happens. Now that we are task force members of Search and Rescue, everyone in our community knows us. We are now formally trained in the skills although we learn mainly by observation and not really by practice. But that is something we never had access to before. We know, now, we are capable; even men have a degree of respect for us now."

A man from Amberkol community from Kaldhar district in Balkh said:

> "This was new for our community. But now we know that when women are aware and trained, the entire families are safe. The elders of the community accept it because women members of CBDMC meet and train in sex-segregated spaces."

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[32] Including School-Based Disaster Management Committees, Watershed Management Committees, Child Protection Committees, task forces for S&R and First Aid, etc.

Discourse on women's equal representation brought together several women on the same platform and they started meeting periodically. Where women's self-help groups did not already exist, this was in many cases the first experience for women to work collectively on community matters. When women came together, they gained confidence and courage from one another to critically reflect on their situation, needs, and priorities:

> "Now we have started questioning; we discuss with one another and try to understand why the problems we articulate get lesser attention and are not given priority. Previously, we thought that because we are women, this is our fate. However, now we know that this is not our fate, it is possible to change things to our advantage, though over some time."

6.2. Expanding Spaces for Women

Some of the project elements, to achieve greater inclusion of women, broke gender stereotypes by leveraging the cultural institution of sex segregation. When women were included in the Search and Rescue (S&R) task forces[33], they were entering a domain hitherto considered appropriate only for men. The argument was based on the fact that women can save women, and therefore they should be trained in the basics of search and rescue. This worked to break the resistance of communities against blurring boundaries of gender-specific domains. Initiated with the instrumental motivation of service provision to the community, this approach filled women task force members with a newly acquired confidence, which spilled over to inspire a larger section of women to acquire information. The task force members took part in periodic training; while they may not have been proficient in all the techniques, they overcame barriers by engaging with such activities:

> "We have now started meeting together often and started learning from one another. Coming together gives us a sense of solidarity; the meeting place is now a platform for sharing and exchanging information and learning from those who have received the training."

It is through this sense of solidarity that women gained strength from one another, worked collectively, built networks, and generated demand for opportunities and services – all of which are prerequisites for powerful advocacy and pathways for strengthening women's agency and voices.

These expanded spaces, when facilitation of conversations is initiated, have enabled women collectively to articulate their unaddressed critical needs and priorities and also justify with a compelling argument why such needs could be integrated into project elements such as awareness raising and small-scale disaster mitigation initiatives (which deal mostly with built environments). Women who were met across all provinces expressed this:

> "We need literacy classes folded into the project activities; a literate woman has access to information, can talk with confidence, and can read information, displayed in places like hospitals and community centres, or in the house of a CBDMC member."

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[33] Women were also members of the First Aid task forces, which is well-aligned with their gender roles of taking care of sick and injured members of the family.

A middle-aged widow in Qwaq community in Shortepa district of Balkh said:

> *"In fact, drinking water is a critical need in this sandy area; but instead of addressing this critical need, they have built five bridges. We were clamouring for drinking water, but no-one listened to us. Our girls in the village are traveling long distances to bring water and [are thus] not able to go to school. Yes, bridges are needed, but so are some facilities for drinking water. I am a widow and the sole supporter of my family, but I spend more time in ensuring the supply of drinking water than engaging in livelihood activities."*

This narrative represents the views and experiences of women in other provinces as well, especially those without any male support. In this case, women have started articulating their needs clearly and powerfully, and are restless to exercise their collective agency to influence the community decisions in their favour. This points to the shifting of spaces, thanks to the project initiatives, in areas where they never thought of speaking out.

6.3. Shifting Perceptions of Men

> *"This village has become aware of women's capacities; we have become aware that when women have access to opportunities and an enabling environment, they make maximum use of them. If we are in need of first aid or even rescue, we will not hesitate to ask help from them; asking help from women was unthinkable before."*

[A man in FGD in Yakawlang, Bamyan]

Because of this shift, men in almost all FGDs across communities, shared that they have started encouraging women in their households to attend events organized under this project. This transformative shift in the perception of men, opens up avenues for women to exercise their agencies through negotiation for more mobility and access to opportunities hitherto denied. For instance, in central Bamyan, Gulnar, a university student, was the sole woman in the farmers' training related to the prevention of soil salinity and climate-smart farming practices. In another community in Sadbargan village in Namakab district of Takhar province, Ameena(name changed), a single woman, negotiated with the traditional *Shura* of elders through persuasion, assertion, and sustained dialogue to gain control over her inherited land so that she could receive and plant fruit saplings under the tree plantation element of the project.

Both instances demonstrate how women exercise their agencies to expand their spaces, even as social norms and certain criteria of selection of beneficiaries remained loaded against them. Both instances also shed light on how within the constraints of norms and disempowering realities, both Gulnar and Ameena were able to influence the decision-making processes through multiple ways: negotiation, persuasion, assertion, and informed dialogues.

Although such instances are few, they indicate how obstacles to the pathways can be removed and by so doing present some important lessons for decision makers.

6.4. Access to Information and Opportunities for Participation

The *Hazard, Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis* (HVCA) and mock drills were events where a large number of men and women and girls and boys, including those with disabilities, gathered together for discussions and actual drawing of the risk, exposure, vulnerability, and capacity/resource maps. The discussions were also distilled into the seasonal calendars of hazards and livelihoods as well as the rankings of the hazards in terms of severity and frequency. In all of the FGDs and other conversations with women and men, and boys and girls, it was revealed that participants had gathered a good deal of information on disaster risk through participating in the events. The participation may not have been focused and substantial by all; some were mere observers, and some participated more actively. The outcome of this process was the Community Based Disaster Preparedness Plan (CBDP) plan, a key document for Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR) processes to take off.

Women had discussions, facilitated by a woman community facilitator in sex-segregated groups, and were able to recall a few issues discussed. However, they said that they did not know whether their inputs were integrated into the "final [CBDP] plan". A reading of CBDP plans in the communities visited showed that the plans were gender-neutral/-blind – there was no specific mention of women's sex- or gender-specific vulnerabilities. Data in the majority of the plans did not capture the women-headed households, pregnant women/girls, number of midwives, displaced households and status of women within them, persons with disabilities with gender-disaggregation, number of extremely poor and asset-starved families, especially those without male support, and the critical needs of women and adolescent girls during disasters.

This point is highlighted here as these processes (HVCA, CBDP, etc.) were excellent opportunities that, given greater gender-informed facilitation, would have yielded rich insights into women's perception of their risks, vulnerabilities and capacities, and critical needs. Had appropriate systems been put in place to integrate and institutionalise the inputs thus generated into the CBDP plans, women would have been able to channel their voices and agencies to develop a blueprint for reducing the risks of "double disasters" that they face[34] because of their gender and other intersectional factors such as age, disability, marital status, displacement status, ethnicity, language, literacy, etc.

6.5. Leadership Opportunities

Although the field study reveals that leadership of the CBDMCs and their two main taskforces remained in the hands of men, in a few instances, women were also performing leadership roles formally or informally. In Yakawlang, Bamyan, Seema was appointed as formal leader of the CBDMC by consensus. Since a man headed the Community Development Council, the lowest rung of the local governance structure, it was decided that the CBDMC should be headed by a woman. Seema, a well-known and well-respected teacher of the Yakawlang Girls' High School, has the acceptance of parents, students and influential people in the community. Therefore, it becomes "easier for [her] to mobilise the community". According to her, more and more women started showing interest in the project activities and were

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[34] Bradshaw, S. & Fordham, M. 2014. Double Disaster: Disaster through a Gender Lens. In: Collins *et al*. (eds). *Hazards, Risks and Disasters in Society*.

turning up in large numbers to attend any meeting that was called for raising awareness, critical reflections, and disseminating information. She said:

> *"Because I am a woman, I understand problems women face during any emergency, including natural hazards turning into disasters. I extended themes of the meeting beyond the prescribed ones under the SRACAD project. I mobilised women on health and hygiene issues and those related to domestic violence – when disasters strike these issues assume importance."*

It can be inferred that it was possible to motivate and mobilise women because the leadership was in the hand of a woman. In the communities where segregated spaces are respect and are norms, they can be leveraged to advance women's voices and agencies through women leaders. The offshoot of women leadership is that:

> *"Our meetings are not confined to discussing matters in the confines of SRACAD activities; when we meet our discussions encompass a whole range of issues women and children face. We also discuss the conditions of the school and how we can leverage the small-scale mitigation interventions to make schools safe for our girls."*

Women's leadership enhances their ownership on the community resources. For example, under the leadership of Seema, the First Aid and CERT kits are available to both women and men:

> *"Men do not feel dependent on women when the ownership of the assets is with women, but women do [feel dependent] when men have control over the assets. Because the community assets remain with the CBDMC Head, I have them in my own house which I use as an official space as well. Women taskforce member feels free to practice more regularly as they have easy access to the kits."*

When a trusted woman leader is at the helm of the affairs, the mobility of the women in the communities increase. In the above case, men, including Mullahs in the community, trusted her and knew that:

> *"[She] will not do anything against the framework of the tenets of Islam. Hence, women started pouring into the meetings without any fear of backlash from the families."*

However, despite the leverage that she has as Head of the CBDMC, she said that she is "not able to take major decisions when it comes to pushing for women's priorities". She further gave a list of the needs which was not addressed, even though she had supported women to voice such needs as: 1) adult literacy; 2) drinking water facilities; 3) expert women trainers for training women taskforce members; 4) farm training for women by woman agriculture experts; 5) more appropriate tools in the kitchen-garden toolkits; 5) special provision for pregnant women in the CERT kits; 6) drinking water storage; 7) washrooms for girls in the schools; and many other such issues.

In Qalqaan Saay community in Hazart-e-Sultan of Samangan province, Kubra Khala (as she is popularly known in the community), a widow, became a *de facto* leader to motivate and rally both women and men to engage in innovative activities for DRR. Her middle age also works in her favour; older women can speak out more forcefully and have more space to manoeuvre their participation to a substantial level. This leader has helped the community to become more self-reliant; for example, she has taught community

members to make stretchers from locally-available materials, thus expanding the efficacy of their CERT kits. Her agency – in the context of socio-cultural norms in many communities in Afghanistan – was mainly contingent on her age and marital status. The realisation that she has space to leverage on this agency strengthened her intrinsic motivation to take on new initiatives and challenges (as in the case of the stretchers). Herself a CBDMC member, she heads informal meetings with women at her residence which generate a sense of collective consciousness and solidarity among women.

> *"CBDRM activities can be either taken narrowly to target specific activities or can be expanded to bring in its fold all those factors that reduce vulnerabilities and increases capacities."*

The above illustration explains that although women voices have started emerging, which is a huge gain, the agencies to translate these voices into concrete actions are still missing.

6.6. Efforts to Address Practical Needs of Women

The entry point which faces the least resistance is through addressing the practical needs[35] of women – they align with the traditional gender roles within the operational socio-cultural norms in a community. Under the project, the ARC members had chosen the kitchen gardening for women beneficiaries juxtaposing it with the tree plantation program which mainly was targeted at men. Kitchen gardening initiative is a well-entrenched intervention by the development organisations, in Afghanistan. A great entry point, it addresses the practical needs of women in terms of increased household and individual incomes, and improved food security and nutrition for the families. The intervention also gives women access to appropriate and cutting-edge climate smart technology. A few women in Sarighar Jadid in Takhar province received training for vermicomposting, which made them more aware of integrated farming, resulting in enhanced decision-making on the use of bio-resources and organic farming techniques in their own yards. This small-scale beginning helped these women to see greater possibilities for food security and income generation and has highlighted the need for more such trainings for overall well-being and thereby better resilience of them and their families. These initiatives in turn, give the women beneficiaries both visible and invisible agencies to improve their conditions in household and community spaces by voicing their opinion, concerns, and priorities, and influencing the household as well as community level decisions. Acquiring new capacities means boosting production leading to an increase in individual income and also decision-making on how the income, however little, should be spent. Most women who had healthy vegetable gardens, after ensuring a healthy diet for themselves and their families, market the remaining produce to get additional incomes, which they have used for sending their children, especially daughters, to local schools. In a focus group a homemaker in Ayenacha community in Aybak district in Samangan said:

> *"There are suddenly smiles in the village. We love to work on the kitchen gardens with the technical knowledge we received about soil, fertilisers, and watering the plants. My garden is*

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[35] Practical needs relate to women's traditional gender roles, typically household chores including caring roles, and home-based or supplementary livelihood occupations. Interventions to address practical needs of women typically do not cause resistance by the communities, as the aim is to bring some comfort to women and free them from drudgery.

> *replete with seasonal vegetables, which we use in our own kitchens and take to the market to earn income."*

She carried on with hearty laughter:

> *"Money is the key to unlock our voices—when we start earning, we have some say to speak and influence the decisions, taken by the male members of the households."*

The women beneficiaries of the kitchen gardening interventions gathered together to receive training and since then started meeting in informal settings. A sense of solidarity has started emerging among them:

> *"We were strangers before, but now we have organised ourselves in a spirit of sisterhood. We learn together, it is here that women members of CBDMC and taskforces also raise awareness about the risks, exposure, and ways to mitigate the impacts of disasters."*

> [A woman in a focus group in Bamyan Central]

Currently, these informal institutions of women are tenuous as a critical mass of

women lack the skills and expanded perspective of analysing their issues and representing their common interest in the key decision-making bodies (although many women in the CBDMCs are members of the Community Development Councils). However, these informal institutions have led to heightened awareness and a sense of solidarity among women, contributing to the social capital of the community, an essential attribute of the resilient communities in both Disaster and development contexts. Thus, addressing practical needs of women through kitchen gardening have paved the way for women to strive for their strategic needs: leadership, critical reflections and striving to gain access to ownership rights, enhanced access to information, and their increased access to public spaces, such as training, community centres, and local markets.

Kitchen gardening initiative though has not benefitted all beneficiaries equally. The need for water and fertile soil and marketing have become constraints for those women who do not have the support of adult male members. This issue is more clearly explained in the following sub-section.

6.7. Readiness to Accept Women's Expanded Spaces and Shifting Roles

In almost all FGDs in communities across four provinces, it was gathered that the ARC efforts to engage women in most activities had brought about a readiness in the communities to accept women in roles which were previously unthought of. In most cases, new opportunities to engage in new skills offered a fluidity in terms of gender roles. For example, an institutionalised approach to S&R training was a fresh domain for most communities. The ARC members had influenced the communities for inclusion of women in training to impart S&R skills. When women members of the task forces started learning basic life-saving skills such as S&R and First Aid, the communities became aware that women are capable human resources who can offer useful services when the need arose. First Aid trainings for women fell under the traditional caring role of women, but when S&R skills were added to such training, women appropriated some spaces hitherto unavailable to them.

Similarly, transect walks to understand the risks and resources including safe and unsafe sites in the context of disasters, were something new to the communities. In Jowzjan province for example, women in Naubahar village said:

> "It was the first time we saw our own village with fresh eyes and new understanding. We never looked around with alertness at the attributes of our surroundings [the way] we did when in a group we were taken on the transect walk. We were the direct observers of which are the safe evacuation routes if some disasters happen; which are the unsafe sites we should avoid; and what are the resources of our village. We had a feeling of elation; we wanted to do it again from time to time. Since then if women walk together to observe something in the village, our movements are not resisted."

Women's approach to these activities comprised an attempt to find spaces within the existing cultural norms. The fluidity of gender roles thus encompassed both practical needs and strategic interests of women, again adding to their voices and influencing their agency.

In Doab Chap Dara village in Bamyan, Farida became the first woman to receive 1,500 non-fruit saplings after she brought to the attention of the CBDMC that she met all the criteria of being an eligible recipient of the saplings. These criteria included ownership and access to land, availability of water, and being vulnerable as she was the sole supporter of her bedridden husband (due to cerebral palsy) and 6 children, living in one of the most disadvantaged areas. She hereby shifted from an extremely at-risk space to a much more favourable position. The fact that she was able to hire and manage labour for the first time in her life to plant these trees strengthened both her voice and agency. She has now taken up a leadership role and motivates other women in the neighbourhood by disseminating to each one of them the beneficiary selection criteria for receiving fruit and non-fruit trees.

Farida said:

> "I am not aware of exactly how many other women meet the criteria for claiming their entitlements, but I am confident that I will be able to help in collecting the information of women who meet the criteria and can benefit from the activities in future."

Her voice and her agency together are inspiring other women to examine the criteria with greater awareness and hope that their gender will not be a ground for exclusion from the benefits of receiving samplings under livelihood interventions.

The biggest change that happened after Farida exercised her agency to manage her land for planting her own saplings is in relation to transformations in the attitudes of the community. Prior to this intervention which benefitted her, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to work in agricultural lands. However, after she managed to develop her plot, the community resistance for women who work on agricultural lands has weakened. This has opened a cultural space for women to engage in activities that had hitherto been inaccessible to them.

6.8. Summary and Concluding Remarks

SRACAD activities have made tangible progress to facilitate the emergence of women's voice and agencies. Women have started to articulate their needs and exercise their agency on matters that had previously not been possible. This has generated confidence amongst women to continue to expand their agencies, while also reflecting that communities are becoming more receptive to shifting roles of women. Leveraging cultural spaces related to sex-segregation, the role of older women in communities, using literacy classes to disseminate information and knowledge on DRR and other matters, potential leadership roles of women, and the ambiguity of new and emerging activities that have yet to become defined as men's or women's domain proved to be effective for women to become more empowered. This is a slow and incremental process as women's voices and agencies shift, and there remains much to be done. However, there is no doubt that various pathways – negotiation, persuasion, assertion, and informed dialogues – are still available within the constraints of social and cultural norms to influence decision-making by allowing women's voices to be heard and their agencies to be exercised.

7. Constraints on Women's Voices and Agencies

This section sets out to reflect in a constructive manner the constraints because of which opportunities and sites of leverage were lost to hear women's voices and promote their agencies in relation to community resilience against disasters. The section is thus not intended to be merely a description of the project activities. Rather, it distils essential insights through a consolidated analysis of the various angles of voices and agencies of women. These constraints are widely generalisable and themselves offer a framework to analyse the position of the other vectors of marginalisation and exclusions embedded in the gender discourse: age, marital status, disability, minority and displacement status. It draws on but does not exclusively consider all of the elements covered under the Situation Analysis.

7.1. Unequal Representation and Token Participation

All members of the ARC are committed to increasing women's representation in key local-level committees (e.g. the CBDMC and Watershed Committees) and have made encouraging gains in this direction. However, in many areas in Balkh and Takhar, women were poorly represented with some of the committees having less than 30 percent female representation. Many women did not know why their representation was less than that of men. Discussions with men's groups revealed that they too were not aware of why a lesser number of women were represented in the committees. Many pointed to the conflict between, on the one hand, having equal representation, and on the other hand, the compulsion to include more men to placate their desire for gaining entry to such committees as representation on the committees is considered a position of power to gain access to project benefits.

> "In fact, women's representation should be more than equal representation. Women members of the committee are expected to move around in the villages, and sometimes to more distant sites as well, to disseminate information related to risk reduction among other women. However, a woman feels safe when she moves with another woman. We always move together in pairs. We are three or four in the committees, if we are at least ten women, a pair of five women can work wonders for awareness-raising among other women. Only

women can reach out to women effectively, and not men. Moreover, men always think that knowledge and information is the domain of men and not of women, so they rarely transfer critical information related to disasters to them."

The current level of participation of women in discussions and decision-making processes in the committees can at best be termed token participation. Women did discuss in sex-segregated groups about what they had learnt from certain trainings, such as S&R and First Aid training, and what the precautions are that they should take in the face of a disaster. However, when it comes to decision-making, the final decisions are still made by men:

"It is very rare that they take into account our needs and priorities that we discuss and finalise in sex-segregated groups. We wanted drinking water near our homes; we also wanted some safety for our pregnant women; we wanted some benefits from Cash-for-Work; and good training in the farming skills; but these priorities were not considered."

A midwife in the group said:

"I raised the issue of pregnant women and how vulnerable they are during floods and other types of disasters. It is not uncommon that we often hear about premature birth, or still-birth or abortion, or worse still, the death of both mother and unborn child. I suggested that an emergency delivery kit is kept with me, which I would use during disasters when such situations arise. During the floods, in fact, when mobility becomes restricted, I often perform deliveries in my own house, with poor equipment and sanitary supplies. However, no-one listened. This is the first time that someone is talking to us about what problems pregnant women may face during a disaster."

7.2. Missed Opportunities: Hazard, Vulnerability & Capacity Analysis (HVCA)

The HVCA process proved to be an excellent platform for bringing together women and men including the elderly, persons with disabilities, women heading their households, widows and even those with the status of displaced populations in sex-segregated or mixed groups. Many participants – either by working on the community maps or engaging in conversations and analysis of hazards, vulnerability and capacities – remembered some parts of the HVCA process, even though much of it evaporated for those who were not literate and could not revisit the written document. However, the information gathered through the process and documented in key documents such as the CBDP plans was of a general nature, and excluded explicit reference to women-specific needs, priorities, vulnerabilities, and capacities.

Limited Gender-Sensitive Facilitation of Consultations

In the absence of gender-sensitive facilitation of interviews and group discussions to listen to their voices, women in communities tended to remain silent and accept the status quo. By contrast, a nuanced conversation can help them to talk about their perceptions of what being resilient means to them, their felt realities, and what obstacles come in the way of addressing their needs within a project environment. Good facilitation draws women, especially those who are very marginalised, to think of hitherto unvoiced needs which are important for their survival and well-being before, during, and after disasters occur.

A midwife in Balkh province articulated:

"No, our opinions were not sought; had they been, I would have suggested keeping a dedicated emergency delivery kit under my care. I assist delivering in times of crisis inside my home in unsafe conditions with a paucity of equipment and required items for safe deliveries."

Similarly, in Naubahar village of Jowzjan, women said that the issues that pregnant women face were not touched upon in any of the discussions, even though at any given time there are at least 50–60 pregnant women.

"We never thought of discussing about the solutions which we are discussing today, like having a separate tent for emergency deliveries during the times of disasters."

Consequently, these women remain at high risk in the face of disasters. For women, disaster preparedness necessitates preparation for such exigencies.

7.3. Women's Voices Not Reaching Decision-Makers

Women community facilitators have a wealth of knowledge about the constraints that women face, and how project elements can be shifted to focus on addressing the priorities of women in general, and those who are extremely marginalised, in particular. However, it was gathered from all sites that these voices get lost in the maze of "line management". Even when such matters reached higher levels, lack of budget analysis from a gender perspective became the single most common reason for women's priorities being lost in the list of interventions that were instead based on general priorities. At times, the community facilitators themselves are trapped in the culture of silence and stereotypical notions of what a woman can or cannot do; including what she can or cannot demand.

7.4. Priority-Setting Process: Reinforcing the Status Quo

A deeper level of analysis revealed that generally the priorities expressed by women – mostly drinking water or health facilities, materials for protecting plants from poultry, bigger tools and high value-assets (such as shovels, wheelbarrows, large containers for storage of water and buckets), trainings for vermicomposting, extension trainings for farming and livestock, and boundary walls for girls' schools – are recorded. However, women's priorities were pushed down to the lower end of overall lists of project activities when they were combined with the priorities expressed by men. Consequently, the priorities based on which interventions were taken up – e.g. small-scale mitigation structures, capacity-building trainings, selection of assets to be distributed – ended up being those expressed by men. For example, women regularly highlighted the need for improved access to water:

"Women here needed [access to] water, particularly those women who do not have male support, and assets like a donkey. Girls here normally do not go to fetch water; the sources of water are very far, and it is not safe that girls traverse such distances to fetch water. When lacking donkeys or other means of transport, then women have to walk several times to and fro to fetch drinking water. When drinking water is not available to them, they can hardly think of watering the plants which they received for their backyard gardens. Therefore, in the backyard of these women, most plants died due to lack of water."

[A woman in an FGD in Qalqaan Saay community, Hazart-e-Sultan, Samangan province]

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Similar voices and opinions were heard in the communities in Bamyan and Takhar, related to various priorities:

> *"We can voice our needs when we gather in the sex-segregated groups, but we have no power to decide. We have asked for drinking water facilities/storage systems, but an irrigation canal was constructed. We do not have land and we do not farm; I need water for my households and taking care of livestock."*

> *"Fencing our vegetables plots would have helped us a lot. We spoke several times about it; but nothing really happened."*

The sites were different; however, the demands and priorities were the same and tended to remain unheard. Even in situations where the needs were indeed raised such as through sex-segregated consultations, they still remained unaddressed.

7.5. Constraining Criteria for Beneficiary Selection

This study found that, in the absence of a detailed gender analysis, and despite a progressive stance on and mandate for advancing the gender equity agenda, the criteria set for determining the beneficiaries of the various entitlements led to the inadvertent exclusion of women without realisation of such implications. Women in Afghanistan, as elsewhere in developing countries, are rarely land owners. Even in those cases where some are, often the land remains operationally under the control of male kin. For example, one of the criteria for sapling distribution was for beneficiaries to have more than one *jirb* of land-holding as a minimum, or in some cases a minimum of two *jirb* of land. In these communities, owners of one *jirb* of land are considered comparatively wealthy. While many men who had ownership of less than 1 *jirb* of land were excluded, more worrying was that women were by and large excluded, except for a few rare cases. Women who were in marital relationships benefitted indirectly when their husbands, who met the criteria, received saplings of fruit and non-fruit trees. However, widows, women heading their households, women with disabilities (who are not married) and those who are the chief earners for their families for a variety of reasons, were not entitled to receive saplings because they either did not possess the required size of land or were not the *de facto* owners of their inherited land.

> *"Had we received fruit trees, we could have planted and nurtured them on the small piece of land we have; it would have nourished our children and become a source of additional income for us."*

> [Consolidated voices of women from Bamyan and Balkh]

Project staff in the SRACAD sites agreed that the criteria were problematic and needed to be changed if marginalised men and women were to be included.

7.6. Inequitable Distribution of Assets and Entitlements: Unheard Voices and Unexercised Agencies

Project interventions under SRACAD included distribution of agricultural inputs and tools to both women and men to enhance their livelihoods activities. While very few women received saplings under the tree plantation element of the project on climate change mitigation, most women beneficiaries received vegetable seeds for backyard- or home-gardening to enhance food security. However, during discussions

in Balkh, Samangan, Bamyan and Jawjzan, many women expressed that they had not been consulted on the types of tools or inputs that they would prefer for their home-gardens. For example, some of the home-gardens were destroyed by the household's poultry because they had not received materials to fence off the home-gardens. Very poor and marginalised women in Takhar, especially those heading their households, stated that a wire fence was necessary along with the vegetable seeds to protect the garden.

Moreover, the agricultural tools that were distributed along with the seeds seemed to have been selected based on a pre-conceived notion that women use only small tools when engaged in agricultural activities. In almost all FGDs across the project sites, women opined that they wanted bigger shovels so that digging is more effective and faster, and that they can handle a normal-sized shovel. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of women expressed that access to a wheelbarrow would have helped those heading their households and engaged in multiple tasks without any male support:

> *"Those living with their husbands and grown-up sons have wheelbarrows. It is a very important asset. We, who do not have male support and are heading and supporting our households, can use it very efficiently for fetching water, placing our little children there while we are engaged in work, carrying soil, etc. This could have been included in our kitchen gardening tools."*

However, the assumption that cultural spaces in these communities would not allow for women to use wheelbarrows does not necessarily hold true. According to an orthodox Mullah in Balkh:

> *"A woman who does not have any male supporters and must fend for herself and support her family, has some leverage in relation to working in the public spaces in the community. Yes, they can use assets like wheelbarrows, which normally women in normal circumstances will not use. If discussed with the community's influential male members and permission is then given, she can safely use it."*

When women were asked why they did not talk about their wish for more appropriate tools such as wheelbarrows, they said they were not aware that they were in a position to be able to voice such opinions. However, neither during the project needs analysis nor at any other stage prior to this Situation Analysis was this priority voiced, let alone women being able to exert their agency for gaining access to wheelbarrows during the distribution of agricultural tools. The project needs analysis thus fell short in integrating women's concerns into project activities to address their practical needs. Women's voices and agency were countered by self- and pre-conceived notions of what women can handle and what they cannot. The fluidity of the dynamics of social norms was not leveraged to break the rigid division of big and small assets along gender lines. Consequently, the lack of either an enabling environment or more informed discussions with women was not conducive to allowing what women really wanted to emerge from the consultations during the needs analysis.

7.7. Lack of Access to Appropriate Information

In Takhar, in Dashtaq Oliya community in Rushtaq district, women were not aware that all items in the S&R kits were meant for both men's and women's use.

> *"Men told us that helmets and protective jackets were only for them. We never knew it was*
> *for us too. The sizes of the boots are too big for us; all of them are fit for men only."*

The above narrative shows that lack of access to accurate information has influenced women's discussions, voices and ultimately agency in an adverse manner and thus deprived them of a sense of ownership and their entitlements, which ultimately will impede the effective use of these life-saving resources. However, it is not just women who were unaware; men were unaware too. A discussion with a men's group in the same community revealed that they did not know that the items, except protective boots, were also meant for women members of the S&R taskforce.

7.8. Absence of Gender-Responsive Budgeting and Systems to Institutionalise Women's Voices

Absence of gender-responsive budgeting within the project funding allocations, coupled with the lack of a system for periodic review of the voices of women conveying issues, needs and priorities, has impeded women's initiatives to negotiate hard for having their priorities addressed (some instances of which are mentioned elsewhere in this paper). Gender-responsive budgeting would have meant that money would have been earmarked specifically for addressing women's practical and strategic needs within the context of DRR, and consequently made it mandatory for their priorities and choices to be analysed and addressed in a serious manner. Like general priorities, general budgeting would also subvert equitable financial allocation for differential strategic choices of women. In the absence of such a mechanism, there was a tendency for women's priorities to be inadvertently disregarded.

7.9. Unavailability of Gender-Disaggregated Data

Availability of gender-disaggregated data is a powerful tool for greater advocacy for women's needs. Such data can magnify the voices of the marginalised more effectively and expand spaces for their substantial participation in decision-making processes. However, this Situation Analysis revealed that such data were not systematically collected, analysed and shared, whether within ARC communities, with grassroots-level committees or at the policy level[36]. Sharing such data would have allowed for: 1) awareness-raising on the gender and inclusion gaps; 2) creating demand within the communities to have a more equitable distribution of information, assets, and opportunities; and 3) bringing about transformative policy-level changes. Thus, an opportunity was missed to expand spaces for women to, where possible, negotiate by way of assertion, influence and persuasion to exert their agencies to gain better access to and use of the project benefits in an equitable manner. In the absence of gender-disaggregated data, any mention of the number of beneficiaries masked those people, mostly women, who were not able to receive equitable benefits from the project interventions.

7.10.   Missed Opportunities: Process Monitoring

Monitoring, especially monitoring of the implementation process, can become an instrument for encouraging women to voice their critical reflections on project progress and exercise their agencies to

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[36] After the Situation Analysis highlighted the urgent need for gender-disaggregated data, the ARC started preparing a gender-disaggregated database to capture relevant details concerning men and women, girls and boys, with and without disabilities. The organisations also started reporting on the marital status of women, all of which provided a clearer picture of the exclusion-inclusion dimensions of women- and child-headed households across project activities.

turn project elements in their favour. For instance, process monitoring might have discovered the gender gaps described here which would have allowed project management to address them in time. However, when looked at from a gender-inclusion perspective, project monitoring fell short of bringing the concerns of different sub-groups of women to the foreground, albeit unintentionally. Either relevant discussions did not happen, or women did not have opportunities for capacity building on how to articulate their felt needs and strategic choices[37].

7.11.   *Summary and Concluding Remarks*

The above analysis demonstrates that consideration of both women's voices and women's agency remains weak and needs to be paid serious attention to turn vulnerabilities of entire communities into resiliencies. In Afghanistan, women's efforts to exercise their agency in the form of collective or individual resistance is fraught with severe backlash and retribution. Where possible, agency was exerted through multiple means: negotiation and persuasion, leveraging the traditional and informal justice system, and appealing to the sense of sympathy concerning the status of singlehood in a society where living with one's husband is considered a privilege. However, the absence of community dialogues that give due traction to women's voices makes them accept the status quo with resignation:

> *"We are women, and this is our fate."*

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[37] Examples of such needs and priorities include: a tent for pregnant women; disseminating information on availability of midwives; training on search and rescue skills by a qualified woman trainer; engaging women agriculturalists for training of women farmers; having appropriate tools desired by women; changing the criteria for selection of beneficiaries to include most marginalised women; having integrated inputs for women-centred interventions such as vegetable gardens; drinking water facilities; dovetailing dissemination of DRR information with community-based literacy classes; question surrounding women's dependence on women for access to life-saving resources; etc. The need for representative bodies of marginalised interest groups was obvious but unarticulated in the monitoring processes.

SECTION IV: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

8. Recommendations and Way Forward

This section offers constructive suggestions derived from field experiences on how conditions could be institutionalised within DRR/CBDRR discourses and practices to promote women's voices and expand their agencies. While the Situation Analysis was situated in concrete and field-specific contexts related to the implementation of the SRACAD project by the ARC members, it has become clear that the recommendations emanating from this study are generalisable to other contexts for DRR and indeed to practitioners in the broader humanitarian and development fields. The recommendations outlined here thus do not focus specifically on project activities, but rather on the broader theme of leveraging social and cultural norms to facilitate the hearing of women's voices and exercising of their agencies.

8.1. Creating an Enabling Environment

The analysis of the findings from the field has highlighted the need to create an enabling environment for women's voices and agency to emerge and expand. Creation of such an enabling environment will mean instituting dialogues in which women can participate and speak without fear and inhibition and explore multiple strategies – at times facilitated – within the constraints (or expanses) of existing socio-cultural spaces. This will help them to place their priorities and choices, needs and interests, at the centre of project activities – i.e. have their voices heard – and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families – i.e. exercise their agencies. In the context of Afghanistan, women have been conditioned to accept their fate and not attempt to change the status quo. Consequently, they are not making their critical needs and priorities heard because they aren't being asked about them. This can be addressed by critical reflection through finding opportunities with the existing cultural spaces to facilitate such reflections. The creation of such an enabling environment entails multiple dimensions. Across diverse cultural contexts, by and large, these dimensions include some of the following.

Sex-segregated conversations

> _"We can talk and discuss frankly when we are in our own space with no male watching and listening to us…"_

This requires shedding the notion that when women sit along with men, they are more empowered. Many field observations revealed that when women occupy spaces alongside men, they are silent and tend to approve of and agree with the hegemony of male voices. The strategy adopted during the Situation Analysis was to have women involved in the discussions with men wherever social norms allowed for that so that they could observe and have access to information on the men's perspective, but at the same time not to give up on the sex-segregated conversations/discussions with women.

In almost all places visited during the Situation Analysis, women became more vocal and articulate in a sex-segregated setting. It was here that most of the insights of this analysis were generated, and compelling evidence was collected on what went well and what was significantly missing despite the best intentions of the ARC members to work with women for equitable outcomes. It was only when women

gathered in their own spaces, away from the male members, that they shed light on the type of conflicts – silent and hidden – between the priorities of men and women that they experienced.

> *"We wanted water very badly, we wanted drinking water, instead of 5 bridges that were constructed in the community. We did express our views, but no-one listened to us. There is no water anywhere near; our girls and boys go to collect water in the hot sun – one of the reasons they do not attend school or perform poorly in school is because of lack of time for studying at home. In some areas only the boys go to fetch water; those who have donkeys are the lucky ones, they do not have to walk on foot and can bring many containers of water; those who do not have them, suffer very badly. The vegetable gardens – a good initiative – are dying for those who do not have boys or any male support to fetch water for irrigating the plants." (Voices of women in Focus groups in Balkh)*

Informed Facilitation of Discussions

> *"We do not have those tools which help us analyse and voice our needs; we know our needs and priorities deep down, but we need support in bringing them to the surface and articulating them."*

Closely linked with the dimension mentioned above, engagement in an informed conversation, or facilitation to ensure that the flow of information is two-way, encourages and brings to the centre the feeblest of voices from women, especially those of marginalised women. Often women become adapted to their own marginalised situations and thus fail to analyse their own needs. This in turn reinforces the deprived status in which they find themselves. However, when some questions are asked that helped them realise that talking about certain issues has legitimacy, conversations flowed more freely and touched upon many issues that they never talked about or thought of talking about:

> *"Yes, many pregnant women remain at risk in times of floods, but we never thought of asking for a well-equipped tent in the Search and Rescue kit that can ensure safe emergency deliveries. We also did not think of disseminating the contact numbers of the midwives in our own or proximate communities, for emergency help."*

> [Consolidated voices of women from communities of Jowzjan, Samangan, Bamyan, Balkh]

A midwife from Qwaq, Shortepa in Balkh province articulated:

> *"No, our opinions were not sought; had they been, I would have suggested keeping a dedicated emergency delivery kit under my care."*

Unless such systematic conversations become an integral and compulsory part of all aspects of the CBDRR processes, such as the HVCA and process monitoring, it will remain problematic for women to voice their opinions and exercise their agencies through lobbying, persuasion, and negotiations. For example, during some of the more informed discussions, it emerged that the Search & Rescue kit has protective shoes for S&R teams that are too large for most women members' feet, as the norm for procurement remained typical male shoe sizes. Even the school teachers who were interviewed said that they did not share this information with the monitoring team.

"We were happy that we got something; no-one asked us if the shoes fit us or how we were using the resources available, whether or not we had easy access to them. We, therefore, did not know how to bring this issue up."

[Women teachers in Sayeed Abad Girls High School, Firoz Nakhchir district, Samangan]

The facilitation of informed discussions should not just be limited to situation analyses; they should ideally form an integral part of process monitoring so that feedback can be channelled into refining the project activities to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes and impacts.

8.2. Developing Women's Collectives

"Alone we are vulnerable, together we get strength from each other."

In highly gender-segregated communities, wherever they exist, women's formal and informal collectives play a significant role in galvanising their voices and press for their priorities through overt and covert means. For women (and among them the most marginalised sub-groups) and by extension for any groups who are excluded from the mainstream, such collectives are sites for articulation of needs and influencing the decisions typically made by hegemonic forces in the community. These interest/pressure groups may collectively look, with fresh and inclusive perspectives, at opportunities and strategies to negotiate with the existing cultural norms. An informed collective thinking can turn the cultural norms in their favour to secure women's access to and agency over resources, information, skills, and capacities[38]. In the development field, women's collectives and Disabled men and women's Organisations are now widely recognised for their engagement with the stakeholders at different levels, including with Government stakeholders. Any DRR project committed to building the resilience of the communities through substantial engagement of women should also recognise the critical need to form and support such collectives to reduce gender gaps in mortality, morbidity, sustainable livelihoods, and severity of impacts of the damages caused to critical community infrastructure.

8.3. Transforming the Priority-Setting Process

"We voice our priorities, but they never remain on top of the list."

All supportive systems should be in place to magnify women's voices and expand the spaces within which they can exert their agencies. One important way to do this is to record the priorities voiced by women and their different sub-groups separately and not to mix them with those expressed by men. Some priorities may be commonly agreed upon by both women and men; but some others may be subject to hidden and unvoiced conflicts, such as the conflict between drinking water and irrigation water. When women's needs are prioritised in a separate list rather than as part of a general one, and resources are set aside for addressing them, the gender gaps between needs and priorities can be effectively bridged. Such bridging of gaps will offer further encouragement to women to: 1) take discussions and consultations amongst themselves more seriously; 2) expand the scope of such discussions; 3) articulate needs and

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[38] For example, it is possible to increase the number of women in the task forces and committees by leveraging the norms which prevent women from moving alone in public spaces beyond prescribed distances. Women's mobility beyond such distances is accepted if they move together. When it is recognised that women should be involved in certain activities (e.g. S&R teams), this cultural norm can then be used to negotiate for larger representation of women.

priorities with more conviction; and 4) influence the final decisions in a myriad of ways – both directly and indirectly.

8.4. Reviewing Selection Criteria from the Gender and Inclusion Perspectives

"When criteria themselves are exclusionary, there is no space for our voices or decisions."

The majority of FGDs captured the frustrations faced by both women and men when they found themselves excluded from some of the project activities because of the selection criteria. A case in point is the distribution of tree saplings for plantations as part of the eco-based solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Clearly, the selection criteria were established without taking into account the implications for various vulnerable and marginalised sub-groups of both women and men in how they might be excluded from participation in project activities. Such exclusion further decapacitates and disempowers women by reinforcing the perception that there is no space for them to make their voices heard. A more detailed and comprehensive process for establishing the selection criteria would result in more vulnerable people benefitting from humanitarian and development interventions.

8.5. Deepening Strategies to Negotiate with Cultural Constraints for Ownership

"We have ownership rights given to us by Islam, we need support in our struggle to get it. Land is very important for us, it sustains us and our families."

Ownership, voice and agencies are interrelated. While voices are raised and agencies exerted in multiple forms related to decision-making and access to resources, having greater ownership leads to widening the opportunities for substantial participation by women. It is important for participating organisations to explore all spaces within the cultural constraints, however narrow, for advancing women's substantial participation and negotiations for gaining traction for their priorities. Leveraging those Islamic tenets which grant certain rights to women – rights related to education, ownership of assets and land, livelihoods, and many more – will result in the development of multiple strategies for enhancing women's participation that are embedded in the ground realities. These strategies may likely counter the status quo which either does not allow women's voices to emerge, or even when voices are galvanised and reach the male decision-makers, they are either not understood or pushed to lower rungs in lists of overall priorities, based on which managers take decisions on where to channel resources.

8.6. Engaging More Deeply with Men and Mullahs

"We are changing, it is a slow and incremental process. Working with men to think positively about women's entitlement will help women, and by default entire communities."

An ongoing and deepened engagement with men and the Mullahs in communities, taking cognisance of cultural sensitivities, can be made part of awareness-raising and information-dissemination activities – an element which is currently missing from many initiatives. When this happens, the practical needs of women can be brought to the foreground, a process which rarely meets resistance within the communities. Men's and Mullahs' engagement may then provide a better platform for women to negotiate with and influence the decisions being made to address their concerns and specific needs to build resiliencies in the face of disasters.

8.7. Adopting Gender-Responsive Budgeting

> *"Is there money for addressing our priorities and critical needs before, during and after disasters?"*

Earmarking budgetary allocations specifically for the needs and priorities of women[39] will give a better direction to practitioners on how to have more systematic dialogues with both women and men. In this way, women's voices are less likely to be lost within more general lists of priorities. When considering unaddressed critical needs within the SRACAD project, had there been dedicated and gender-responsive budgeting, benefits such as fences and bigger tools in the livelihoods kits, a dedicated and well-furnished emergency tent for pregnant women, correct-sized shoes for women members of the task forces, and leadership and impactful capacity building training in different spheres could have been effected as course correction without losing too much time. Facilitated discussions to set women's priorities and needs, when accompanied by dedicated financial backing, will mean that their voices will receive more serious consideration. When it is clear to communities that such allocations will be dedicated for spending on addressing the needs of women and their marginalised sub-groups, women's participation will deepen and gain wider acceptance. Consequently, their agencies and leadership will be strengthened. Addressing this will require a transformative institutional process following a twin-track approach that combines proper priority setting along with gender mainstreaming through dedicated budget allocations to ensure that these priorities are met.

8.8. Converting Gender-Disaggregated Data into Equitable Outcomes

There is a need to reflect on the fact that availability of gender-disaggregated data is not an end in itself. After the data are disaggregated in terms of women and men, and girls and boys, and their sub-groups (those with disabilities, women-headed households, the elderly, etc.), serious efforts need to be taken to address the gender and other vulnerability gaps illustrated by such data. For example, the gender gap captures the lack of agency and resultant extent of marginalisation. Using this information, interventions can then be focused on addressing these gaps through those strategies mentioned above for achieving more equitable outcomes for women, especially severely disadvantaged groups of women, for turning such situations around.

8.9. Institutionalising Women's Perspectives in Process Monitoring, Course Correction, and Project Progress Reflection

Gender perspectives need to be institutionalised into processes, mechanisms, management and policy-making processes. For this to happen, periodic, systematic and critical self-reflection is necessary. The space for such reflections from grassroots to management levels can be embedded in monitoring and evaluation systems. That will mean that gender-sensitive process monitoring will focus its lens on the spaces, opportunities, ownership, and outcomes which women had needed, demanded, and ultimately

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[39] Gender budgeting means preparing budgets or analysing them from a gender perspective. Also referred to as gender-sensitive budgeting, this practice aims at dealing with budgetary gender inequality issues, including gender hierarchies and the discrepancies between the allocation of funds between women's and men's needs. Gender budgeting allows the entities to promote equality through fiscal means by taking analyses of a budget's differing impacts on the sexes as well as setting goals or targets for equality/equity and allocating funds to support those goals.

were or were not able to receive. It will also bring out the hidden voices of women which they wanted to let out but were hesitant to do so because of conditioning of silence, uninformed facilitation and other factors[40]. Applying a gender lens will bring to the centre stage the voices from women and their marginalised sub-groups, magnifying all intersectional dimensions of vulnerabilities including, but not limited to, age and disabilities. Monitoring processes should also unpack the unexplored spaces, within the given socio-cultural contexts as well as beyond them, for women's substantial participation and decision-making rights.

Process monitoring is not an end in itself, in fact it is an essential tool for course correction. Such course correction requires deep commitment combined with strong political will, appropriate finance allocation to address the gender gaps, and a continuous engagement to explore ways and strategies for promoting women's leadership and agencies in the DRR/CBDRR processes at all levels. These voices will eventually bridge the gap between the grassroots experiences of women and policy-making processes.

8.10. Reconceptualising the DRR Discourse and Practices

"His" risk perceptions and different to "her" risk perceptions, "her" gender- and sex-specific needs[41] are different to "his" needs".

Resiliencies of communities are a function of the depth of social capital and institutions, and how women and men perceive the resilience agenda differently. Women's needs and priorities, and their risk perceptions, may be different than those of men. A "one-size-fits-both [women and men]" approach may leave women less resilient. To characterise resiliencies along the lines of gender equity, it is essential that DRR/CBDRR strategies acknowledge those socially-induced factors that cause double disasters[42] for women: firstly, because they are impacted by disasters, and secondly because of their gender. If there are no mechanisms and institutions in the communities – whether formal or informal – where women and their marginalised sub-groups can highlight the dimensions which make them more severely vulnerable to disasters and press upon institutionalising their voices and agencies in the CBDRR discourse, the vulnerabilities of more than half the section of the community[43] will remain unaddressed, defeating the goal of "resilient communities". There are ways to help reconceptualise the DRR discourse in favour of women by integrating their voices, priorities and needs and by advancing their agencies. This will also

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[40] A gender lens will clearly highlight: that the shoes were not fitting women members of the task force; the absence of equipment to address the concerns of pregnant women; the wrong assumptions by both women and men that protective gear in the CERT kits are for the male members only; the problems women faced in access to the CERT kits under the ownership of men; the selection criteria that exclude the marginalised; the conflict between the priority of women and men; the gender neutrality of the CBDP plans and many more aspects.

[41] Sex-specific needs relates to the biological and reproductive function of women: conceiving, carrying and delivering babies, breast feeding and menstruation. The needs arising from these attributes are termed as sex-specific needs. Gender-specific needs are related to the social constructs/roles attached to one's being a male or a female. The needs arising from these roles are practical gender needs of women. These roles may include discrimination and violation of human rights of women. The needs arising from these discrimination and violation are termed as strategic needs of women.

[42] Bradshaw, S. & Fordham, M. 2014. Double Disaster: Disaster through a Gender Lens. In: Collins *et al*. (eds). *Hazards, Risks and Disasters in Society*.

[43] Bearing in mind for example that children are generally more dependent on mothers, while the elderly and persons with disabilities often rely on the caring services of women, and more so in times of distress.

mean that this reconceptualising will underpin all key documents, institutions and interventions in the field of DRR/CBDRR.

8.11.   Linkages with the women's Organisation, Women leadership and Ministry/Directorates of Women's Affairs

It is necessary to have active dialogues with women's organisations, women's leadership and the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its Directorates at the national and provincial Levels. These institutions have a large database related to women and their subgroups, their issues and needs, and related laws and policies. Their inclusion in the project environment will mean that practitioners are leveraging expertise and experiences, and the rich databases that exist at the national, provincial and district levels. Bringing these institutions on board will mean the alignment of the DRR/CBDRR agenda with the Government of Afghanistan's National Action Plan for Women and the Sustainable Development Goals.

9. Concluding Remarks

Disasters impact different groups of people in different ways, based on their unique socio-economic and environmental contexts. Without giving voice and agency to vulnerable groups, it is difficult to determine specific impacts of hazards on such groups and hinders planning for disaster risk reduction to address their specific vulnerabilities. Therefore, assessing and addressing vulnerability to hazards should be contextualised to local conditions using participatory and inclusive approaches that will facilitate the vocalisation by local communities of their challenges, priorities and needs while also enhancing their agencies to act to address these challenges.

This analysis of field data within the framework of voices and agencies of women – the essential attributes of empowerment of women – have indicated some clear pathways to strengthen them. It is evident that the power and impact of women's voices and agencies will ultimately determine the overall resiliencies of their communities. However, there are constraints, deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural, economic and political fabric of communities, which make it difficult for voices to emerge, be heard and agencies to be exercised, more so in rural communities. It is then imperative for the practitioners to Strengthen facilitating factors, acknowledge constraints and continually invest efforts (such as those recommended here) to explore ways to negotiate, and overcome them. Strategies Conscious reflection and strategies to expand both voices and agencies of women in general – and the most marginalised sub-groups of them in particular – will go a long way in making it possible for women to lead the way in risk reduction in their communities.