

Re-Envisioning Resilience:

Journeys for Gender Equality and Climate Action

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PHOTO: UN WOMEN / NGUYEN MINH DUC

A CALL FROM THE COAST

Ha Long Bay sits in the Gulf of Tonkin in the northeastern part of Viet Nam. Renowned for the natural majesty of its limestone pillars and emerald waters, many tourists come and go, but it is home to hundreds of families living in fishing villages on the water. It was here that Hoang Thi Ngoc Ha found herself, straight out of college, working with the local fisherfolk. “I was fortunate enough to have been hired for a conservation project at a World Heritage Site – it was my first job,” she recalls.

HOANG THI NGOC HA
VIET NAM



It was at this early stage in her career as a researcher and trainer that she was mentored by a professor who opened her eyes to the issues of gender inequality.

“At that time, when we worked with the communities along the coast, usually only men came to participate. Men went to the meetings; men made the decisions; and men were also the ones responsible for fishing at sea.”

“When we wondered why we rarely see girls and women at the meetings, everyone said it was because it was the men’s job.”

She remembered thinking that women must also be affected by major hazards in the community because they too lived on fragile structures that moved and swayed to the rhythm of the sea. Even the everyday activities they did outside their homes happened on the water, including buying and selling goods and attending school on floating classrooms. As most of the women and girls in the village couldn’t swim, it seemed to Ha that that they were placed at constant risk and were in even greater danger whenever a typhoon came in.





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/HOANG THI NGOC HA

She was glad that as part of the project she was working on, she helped design games and activities that would attract girls and young women to learn about the risks they were exposed to. When she saw their keen interest in the environmental education program, she was motivated to learn more about gender issues in climate change and disaster resilience.

“Unfortunately, our knowledge of gender was basic and unsophisticated at the time. We could have intervened more extensively and successfully if we had the methodological understanding that we do now.”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/HOANG THI NGOC HA

While she may have had regrets about not being able to do more then, she has more than made up for it over time. For more than twenty years, Ha has dedicated her life to working on gender-responsive climate action. She wants to contribute to the sustainability of eco-communities by providing evidence on the different ways that men and women are affected by climate risks. At the same time, she wants to increase equal participation among men and women when it comes to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

In her view, women in coastal communities have significant roles and responsibilities when it comes to protecting and restoring ecosystems.

“I hope that in projects responding to climate change or gender mainstreaming, we rethink and revise our plans and activities so strategies and solutions can be developed to strengthen resilience in a substantial and effective way.”





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

CHINKS IN THE ARMOR

In the southwestern part of Bangladesh, you will find the Sundarbans – the largest mangrove forest in the world that spans the territories of both Bangladesh and India. It is home to several endangered species including the famed Bengal tiger. It is also an important source of livelihood for many living in nearby communities. However, the lesser-known purpose it serves is defense against the fiercest typhoons. Time and again, the severity of these storms waned as they crossed over the blanket of mangroves, resulting in less death and destruction further inland.

SHAHANARA KHATUN
BANGLADESH



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

Such was the case when the super cyclone called Amphan hit the country in May 2020, right when it was caught in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic. An estimated 10 million people in Bangladesh were affected by one of the most intense storms to make landfall in recent years.¹ Among the millions who needed to be evacuated were the residents of Satkhira. At a time when Covid-19 infections were steadily rising, those who found themselves in cyclone shelters had to wonder whether it was the wrath of Amphan they would succumb to or the deadly virus.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

“Satkhira is located near the Sundarbans and is much more disaster-prone than other parts of the country. The people here have to fight disasters to stay alive,” shares Shahanara Khatun.

She felt that the women in her district had to fight much harder than the men in order to survive.

“Rural women in this area are lagging behind economically, socially, and politically. They have no rights in society, not even the right to speak.”

This inspired her to establish an organization that would help lift the voices of these women who were grappling with the negative effects of climate change.

“I was a housewife before all these activities. I never stepped out of my household. It was not possible due to the patriarchal mindset.”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

She knew then that she had to bring men and women together to change this way of thinking.

“My first challenge was the people in my community. They always used to make negative remarks about our activities because the women were moving freely.”

To overcome this, her group organized courtyard meetings so that both men and women could have a meaningful dialogue about the issue. Eventually, Shahanara changed hearts and minds and in the process gained plenty of allies, including government bodies and civil society organizations. One of the agencies that her group closely worked with was the Bangladesh Forest Department that assisted their disaster management programs with great enthusiasm.

“We afforested over 6 kilometers of long roads, with men helping us. The surplus leaves from the trees were also sold in local markets, as they were in demand. This opened up a revenue

stream for us and the income was saved for our disaster management fund.”

Shahanara first understood the value of nature-based solutions for climate resilience when she saw how the trees in front of her neighbor’s house saved it from being destroyed by a previous typhoon.

“The areas which have the most trees are able to deflect the wrath of natural calamities the most.”

However, in so doing, forests like the Sundarbans can also sustain damage that would require decades to rehabilitate. This emphasizes that the protective shield nature offers is not impenetrable. Eco-restoration must be an integral part of the fight against climate change or long-term sustainability will be among the biggest casualties.





COMING FULL CIRCLE

In 2013, Doan Vu Thao Ly was seated at her desk for another day of work. A private company had hired her as a junior accountant and administrator shortly after her graduation from Hanoi University of Business and Technology. However, as she was filing documents and managing timesheets, she often thought about the days she had spent as a student intern not so long ago. She remembered poring over pages of research and getting to meet some very inspirational women involved in water conservation.

DOAN VU THAO LY
VIET NAM



“I worked in the private sector, but I always felt that my passion was gender and the environment.”

It took a little time, but eventually she listened to that nagging voice inside her telling her to pursue what she really wanted to do. She went back to the research center where she had previously done her internship. It seemed only fitting, as it was also there that she had that first chance encounter with her true purpose. She has been with the same institution for eleven years now but today, she serves as its deputy director.

Ly takes great pride in the fact that apart from being focused on water conservation, waste management, and climate change, they are promoting women’s voices and participation in climate change adaptation and mitigation.

In her opinion, there is still much to be done in this field of work because available data on gender-related issues affecting the country is sorely lacking.

“We need to continue developing scientific tools to create data and evidence-based information for research and the implementation of projects.”

Experience has taught her that it’s only by delving deeper into gender that you will find just how limited women’s abilities to take part in decision-making still are because of persistent gender stereotypes. While others may be discouraged by this, it is actually what motivates Ly. She sees gender equality as a tool for enforcing climate justice and finds immense value in having more people understand this interlinkage.





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/DOAN VU THAO LY

“We need to continue expanding the network of people who care about gender equality and climate change issues and spread that message more widely.”

This is most likely why she considers the establishment of the Climate Change Pioneering Women’s Network among her most meaningful achievements. Since her organization co-founded the network, it has grown to include more than 20 women-led organizations working on climate change. Its membership is diverse, coming from different parts of the country and possessing expertise in various climate-relevant sectors such as forestry, water conservation, and waste management.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/DOAN VU THAO LY



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/DOAN YU THAO

Through trainings, workshops, and policy dialogues, Ly hopes that the members can exchange knowledge and share good practices to build on each other's strengths and experiences. She has always been certain that women have an important role to play in building climate-resilient societies, and when they come together in full force, she knows that they can be unstoppable.

“I would like to quote a famous person who said: Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean.²”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/NGUYEN PHU DU

HOPE IN ACTION

There is never enough time in a day for Bun Panharith. As the chief of the One Window Service Office in Pursat, she has to make sure that this one-stop shop for public services addresses the needs of all the people in her municipality with speed and transparency. It seems as if the work is never done because everyone flocks to her office to avail of different types of social services, from health and education to agriculture and commerce. After a long day of work, Bun goes home to cook and clean while making sure that her children take their baths and do their homework.

BUN PANHARITH
CAMBODIA





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

Astonishingly, she has also found a way to work with Rural Friend Community Development Organization, a non-government organization that focuses on women’s engagement in gender and climate change issues. With them, she helps conduct dissemination workshops and outreach programs for women who need support during disasters.

“I wish for women to learn as much as they can. It helps the community to have knowledge regarding disaster management.”

She thinks that it is the most vulnerable women in her community that need to develop the courage to express their needs to those in authority the most, especially during states of emergencies. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, that mostly meant droughts and floods, but the ongoing health crisis has made her work and home life a lot more complicated.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

“First of all, we needed to take care of ourselves and our young children. We taught our kids about hygiene and sanitation. Then we also educated people who came to the One Window Service Office seeking services, so they would know about safety measures – wearing masks, conforming to social distancing, and using hand sanitizers.”

Her office was also responsible for coordinating and facilitating the Covid-19 vaccination drive in Pursat. However, despite the many roles she has taken on and the service she has rendered to her community, there are still those who would say that a woman like her belongs in the kitchen. This does not seem to faze her.



“Nevertheless, I will always do my best. Although my actions now are not recognized by others, I believe that we will all benefit from its fruitful outcome in the future.”

With this in mind, she plans to continue increasing the participation of women in social development activities in her municipality. In the future, she wants more of them represented in gender and climate change events at the sub-national and national levels. As an advocate for women’s leadership, she believes that the first step to achieving this is educating young girls.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

“In the rural areas, mothers should allow their daughters to go to school so that they can be resilient and will be able to rely on themselves.”

However, she doesn't think that raising the voices of women and girls is enough. It should come hand in hand with providing them with the platform to be heard. By encouraging those who hold positions of authority to promote women's agency and participation in decision-making, she believes that transformative change is within reach.

She has started to see improvements, sharing that among her proudest moments was when gender and climate issues were integrated into her locality's Commune Investment Program and Commune Development Plan. This is a big achievement for her but at the same time, she knows that there's a long road ahead before the fight against climate change is led by women. Bun, however, is someone who always chooses to forge ahead regardless of the obstacles in her way.

“I believe that disaster management is crucial. Hence, I have to work harder – anything is possible when you have the will and dedication.”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

OUTLINES OF A MALE ALLY

As with many people around the world, life changed for Le Van Son when Covid-19 hit his home country. While Viet Nam exemplified some of the best-in-class pandemic response during the onset of the outbreak in 2020, eighteen months later, it was not spared from the sudden surge in cases caused by the Delta variant. As the death toll and number of infected soared, so did the duration of lockdowns that were implemented. Son and his family have not been exempted from having to live with quarantine restrictions. For the past two months and counting, they have not been able to leave their house. But even in closed quarters, life must go on.

LE VAN SON
VIET NAM





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/NGUYEN MINH DUC

“Work tasks as well as housework and caregiving must continue. When all members of the family are at home and the children are not in school, I am reminded that much of domestic work goes unpaid but still must be completed.”

He struggles with balancing work with home life but is determined to equally share the burden of housework and childcare. Perhaps this is because even amid a raging pandemic, he spent the past year working on protecting the interests of women migrant workers who served as housekeepers in the city of Hanoi.

“We’re focused on promoting the rights of these women, especially to participate more actively in the areas that concern them.”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/LE VAN SON



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/LE VAN SON



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/NGUYEN MINH DUC



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/LE VAN SON

Based on a UN Women report, Vietnamese women account for much of the informal labour force in the country but these jobs have yet to be recognized in existing labour laws.³ This does not come as a surprise to Son. Born and raised in an environment that was riddled with gender stereotypes, he admits that it was only in his adulthood that he was exposed to the social disparities faced by women. In particular, it was women from the most disadvantaged groups in society who lifted the veil of his male privilege.

They gave him a glimpse of the harsh reality that those among them living in poverty, coming from ethnic minorities, working as migrant labourers, or living with disabilities had needs and rights that oftentimes went unrecognized and unmet. Because a large majority of marginalized women are also usually engaged in livelihoods that are especially vulnerable to climate change, they are placed at an even more severe disadvantage.

“This led me to believe that one of the things I need to do is emphasize that every person, regardless of the circumstances they were born in, should have equal access to opportunities and should be able to exercise their rights to the fullest extent possible.”

This has been a guiding principle for Son throughout his prominent tenure as a gender expert. For him, the best part of the work he does is getting to share his knowledge and experience in gender equality and women’s empowerment with those who are willing and able to develop sustainable solutions.



“We have been working every day to help organizations working on climate change to not only understand gender issues and gender-related barriers but also, and more importantly, enable them to implement gender-responsive climate action.”

With his significant contributions to gender mainstreaming in climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as in raising awareness for gender and climate-related issues, what Son offers us is a picture of what it means to be a male ally. He understands that his gender has conferred upon him a distinct social privilege but instead of turning a blind eye, he demonstrates what it means to take a stand against inequality.

OUTSIDE THESE WALLS

Despite being fairly young, Chan Kimcheng has been a farmer for twelve years. Four more years and this length of time would span half her life, but this is not unusual for someone living in the Chroy Svay commune. Most families here make their living off the land and since both her parents were farmers, she started helping them right after graduating junior high school. Unfortunately, soon after that, she lost her father and life became a lot more difficult.

“I have to be responsible for my family because my mom is a single mother. She is old and has a chronic illness.”

CHAN KIMCHENG
CAMBODIA





As her mother's only daughter and the youngest of five siblings, Chan constantly had to prove her worth. This for her went beyond the confines of their home, but when she set out to find a good job for herself, she noticed that young women did not have much luck finding them.

It was clear to her then that they were being undervalued and overlooked because their sole purpose was relegated to cooking and cleaning for their families. Even so, she believed she could do more and started volunteering for workshops and outreach programs to promote eco-tourism in the Srae Ambel district in Koh Kong.





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

The province happens to be the site of an important natural resource for the country. The Cardamom Rainforest provides around 5 million Cambodians with income, food, and water. It produces enough water to power 16 hydropower dams that generate roughly 20 percent of Cambodia's electricity. At the same time, many rural communities use the water from the forest for drinking and irrigation.

With more than 60 endangered species inhabiting The Cardamoms, its biodiversity is one of the most precious in the world but sadly, illegal logging and wildlife poaching have persisted over the years, resulting in its degradation.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

Regular patrols must be carried out to safeguard the protected area, even more so because the forest also plays a critical role in climate mitigation. Covering over 2.5 million hectares, it significantly lowers carbon emissions while preventing droughts and flooding in surrounding communities.

Recognizing this, Chan actively engaged other young people, especially young women, in raising awareness on the importance of forest conservation, conducting activities to protect the forest, and working with the local government and civil society organizations to transform the area into a sustainable tourist destination.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

Despite the success of these efforts though, they have not always been celebrated by others.

“Instead of applauding our work, the authorities stated that this should have been the duty of men. From their perspective, we should not do any work and our main duty is to stay at home.”

She’s had a hard time shaking off these outdated notions as even her mother told her not to focus too much on such activities that were not beneficial to the family.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB



“I said to my mom that I will be capable of handling both things – social work and family.”

Still, there were others who had yet to be convinced. Chan recalled how during patrol duties, her male peers told her that she would be weak and slow because she was a woman. They would also keep asking her when she planned on getting married as she was getting older.

“These things are painful to me but what we need to do is understand the issue and learn how to solve it.”

She believes that by demonstrating how she can make an impact, she will eventually gain the trust and respect of her critics.

“Youth, especially young women, tend to think of themselves as being weak and incapable of doing anything but they are actually the most important asset this country has.”





PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

STRONG AND RESOLUTE

Like many countries in Asia and the Pacific, Bangladesh is one of the world's typhoon hotspots. Every year the country experiences several of these storms, with severe ones happening at least once every three years. For thousands of families living by the water, the torrential rain and violent winds bring with them tsunami-like waves and heavy flooding. In a blink of an eye, their livelihoods could be decimated, their property destroyed, and their loved ones lost.

MURSHEDA KHATUN
BANGLADESH



In these situations, the men, women, and children of Khulna flock to cyclone shelters seeking refuge. However, the facilities and services offered in the shelters do not always consider the special needs of the most vulnerable, including women and girls. This is what inspired Mursheda Khatun to work on gender-responsive disaster resilience.

“Every year we are submerged and inundated by cyclones and other calamities. It’s imperative for both men and women to step up and work together collectively.”



In her family, she needed to work to complement her husband's income or they would not be able to make ends meet. This was not an easy choice to make where she lived and actually doing it was even harder.

“The village elders tried to discourage me from taking up social development work. They said that women should not step out of their houses. Other influential people were also against the idea of a woman running things.”



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

She did not let other people's opinions stop her. She got involved with supporting the women in her community by ensuring they received their maternity allowance and food subsidies. During typhoons, she would help women and those with disabilities get to the cyclone shelters. Her efforts eventually paid off. Within two years, she developed a good enough relationship with the local government to allow her to exert some influence on their decisions.

“It enabled me to advocate for the rights and financial needs of those who were usually deprived of them.”



Her work also did not go unnoticed by other women in Khulna who were interested in doing their part when it came to disaster response. They proposed that she set up an organization they could all be involved in.

“I went to the concerned government officials who dealt with women and children-related activities. They helped me to obtain a registration from the Department of Women Affairs.”



She was then able to establish her organization, Mohila O Shisu Songothon, in 2005 and secure an annual grant from the local government. The organization and its members have since been a critical part of early warning systems. They help children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with disabilities reach cyclone shelters safely and on time.

They also ensure that there are separate toilets for women and men as well as equal distribution of essential goods like food and water in the shelters. After the onset of disasters, they help provide financial assistance to the most marginalized in their community. To aid the economic recovery of women they buy sewing machines or provide loans that can be used to purchase seeds or livestock.



It seems that the work of Mursheda has had a significant impact not only on building disaster resilience but also in changing the gender norms in Khulna. These days, when she walks into an office, she receives salutations. When her organization needs assistance from a local government official, they need only to make a call. These are things that would not have been possible at the beginning of her journey.

“The level of respect I receive now is what’s most meaningful for me. Getting things done at the start was very difficult but now, things are easier. Now, both men and women work in this field and it proves that women can do anything.”

THOSE WHO DARE

By the river Praek Tuek Chhu lies Kampot and a few kilometers south of the city, the river forks to cradle a triangle shaped island called Trey Koh. For many people living here, life is simple but far from easy. Pak Pov can attest to this. Farmers work, day in and day out, on their small rice fields, only for their entire livelihood to be washed away by floods that have become increasingly common over the last couple of years. This was one of the reasons Pak decided to establish a rice bank in her village and why she got involved in mangrove tree planting and conservation.

PAK POV
CAMBODIA





Though before she could do any of that, she had to overcome the many challenges of living in a place where opportunities were limited, especially for someone like her. She was a single mother who needed to work extra hard to feed and clothe her children. She remembers being wracked with guilt every time she had to leave them, and this feeling was only magnified by the criticism she received from the people around her, even those whom she considered family.

“My relatives blamed my always being away from home as the reason my children had nothing to eat.”

It frustrated her that they did not seem to understand that it was precisely because of her children and the desire to give them a better future that she would attend trainings and workshops all the way in the capital of Phnom Penh.

“I don’t want history to repeat itself in my family.”

So, despite the harsh words and disapproving looks directed towards her, she pursued her goal of learning more about gender equality and climate resilience. She recognized the importance of training and empowering women because she knew firsthand what it was like to feel too insecure to engage in decision-making.

In her case, change had to start from within. There was a time she felt that she didn’t have the right skills or knowledge to be taken seriously. It didn’t help that she was constantly mocked by the people in her community, including those who held positions of authority. This made her doubt that she had anything valuable to contribute.



PHOTO: UN WOMEN/ANTOINE RAAB

“I had no confidence in myself. I did not get the chance to participate in meetings. I wasn’t brave enough and wasn’t willing to take part in any of the activities.”

However, all the workshops and volunteer work she started doing lit a lasting spark inside of her. She met many women, children, elderly people, and people with disabilities who were being directly impacted by disasters. Helping them and hearing their stories made her reflect on her own experiences and she realized that they had all gone through similar situations. This encouraged her to keep moving forward.

“I love the work and I want to help people so that they do not have to endure the same hardships that I had gone through before.”



She wants to make a positive impact at an even larger scale. As a founding member of the Women Champion Network in her province, she helps conduct awareness-raising activities for gender-responsive climate action and tries to influence the government to address the needs of women who are most affected by climate change and disasters. She has even helped to develop the network's women's Charter of Demands for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation and served as its representative in national events.

“I am brave, flexible, dedicated, and quick to carry out my duties.”

In this manner, Pak has also been serving as the chief of her village for two years now. She hopes to continue raising the voices of women by encouraging them to actively participate in meetings so that their needs can be addressed.

“I would like to ask women in the community to be brave.”

In her mind, there is no way to be heard if you do not speak up, and she is living proof that those who dare can make a real difference.

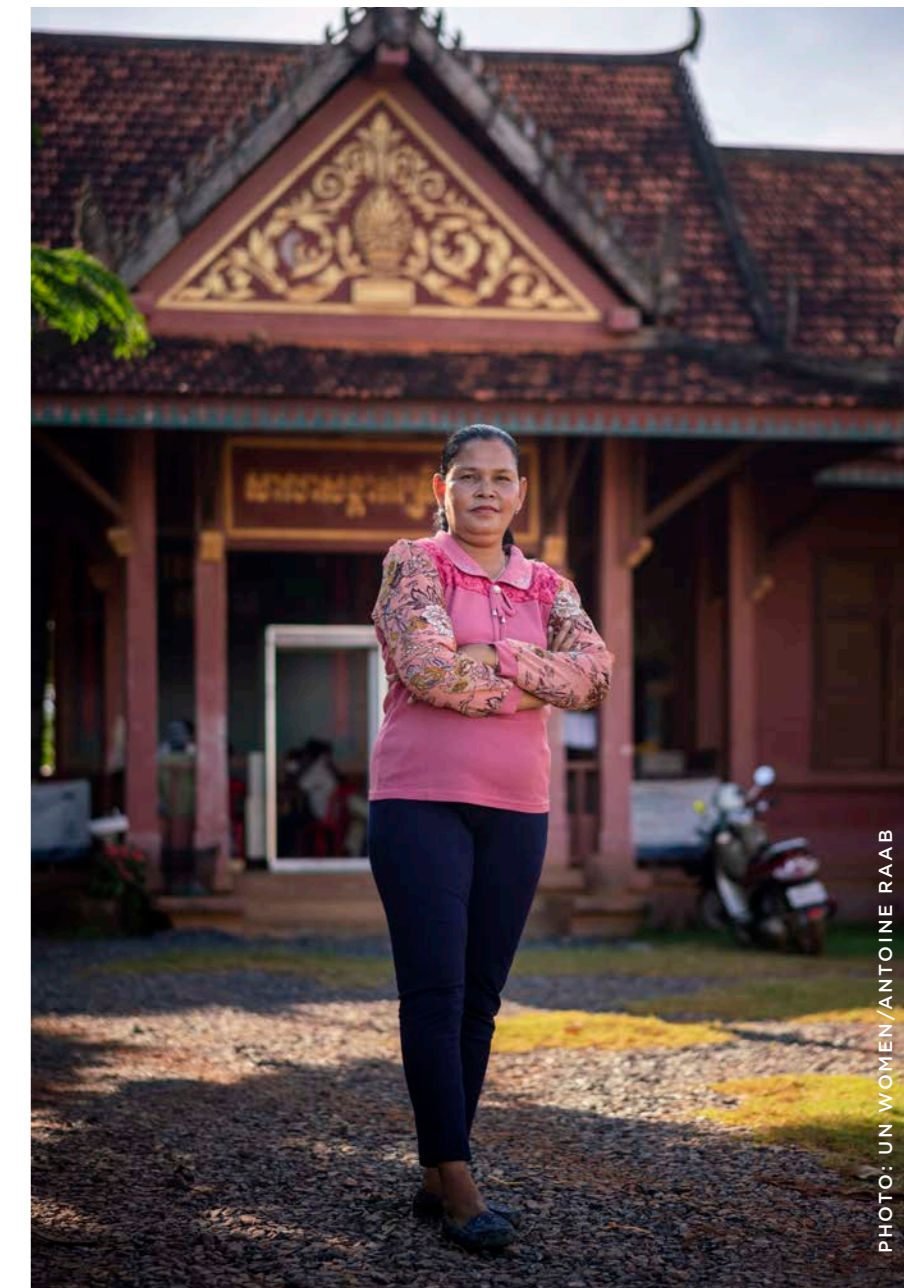




PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD KAIZER

WHEN THE WATER SUBSIDES

In September 2021, schools across the country had started to reopen after the prolonged closures brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, while many students were excited at the prospect of reuniting with their teachers and classmates, or at the thought of finally opening their books again, the same could not be said for the children in Kurigram. This loss of opportunity was not due in part to any quarantine restriction but was instead caused by the recent flood that damaged two hundred schools and swept away seven completely.⁴ As roads leading to schools were also rendered inaccessible, no classes or repairs could take place.

ROKEYA BEGUM SHAFALI
BANGLADESH



With sixteen rivers known to overflow during heavy rainfall, flooding is nothing new to this area.

“It was in 1998 while I was working in Kurigram that I realized it was one of the most vulnerable districts to calamities, and so I knew it was also there that I had to work to bring about change.”

For Bangladeshis, the year Rokeya Begum Shafali mentions evokes memories of ‘the flood of the century’ washing over the nation. The 1998 floods had lasted for an unprecedented three months and covered 68 percent of the country, affecting almost 31 million people with the devastation it left in its wake.⁵

During that time, Rokeya was still living in Cumilla and recalls travelling back and forth to Kurigram, 437 kilometers away.

“We used to see which houses were submerged due to soil erosion and land degradation. We then elevated the height of those houses, giving its inhabitants some respite. During the succeeding floods, it was actually seen that the elevation helped in preventing the houses from becoming inundated.”

She would later go on to travel the district so extensively that even the local people there had never visited many of the places she had been to. They actually could not fathom a woman frequenting such far-flung vulnerable areas.





Evidently, upon moving to Kurigram, she had to take on the task of changing gender norms as well. Men there did not believe it was possible to sit beside women and discuss solutions to problems with them. After conducting a lot of trainings, however, the men finally began to see that women should take part in decision-making and developing climate resilience. Rokeya took this as proof of what she had come to understand about the value of capacity-building.

“Aid is momentary. What we give them only helps them during the floods. If we did not train them or raise their awareness before the floods come again, then the same things would happen.”



For this reason, she has been part of conducting scores of disaster preparedness trainings tackling topics such as what to do during floods, how to inform people when a flood is coming, and how to assist those who become stranded.

“There is no discrimination. We work with everyone. As floods usually come rapidly, it becomes difficult for pregnant women, children, the elderly, and those physically challenged to escape from submerged locations. We provide training on how to rescue them and take them to flood shelters.”



However, in the close to 27 years of her doing this kind of work, she regrets that the situation has only gotten worse. In 2017, she was shocked to see that entire villages had gone underwater.

“We have to develop better rehabilitation plans as well as effective livelihood support for the survivors. Women are among the most vulnerable to climate change in Bangladesh. If we worked with men and women, both would be able to play pivotal roles in helping themselves and each other during future calamities.”

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