



## Understanding the Marginal Role of Women in Disaster Resilience in India

Sandeep K Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Mamta Chhabra Sharma<sup>2</sup> and Santosh Kumar Yadav<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry, Rajdhani College, University of Delhi, New Delhi-110015

<sup>2</sup>Principal, Department of Chemistry, Aditi Mahavidhyalaya, University of Delhi, New Delhi-110039

<sup>3</sup>Department of Mathematics, Aditi Mahavidhyalaya University of Delhi New Delhi-110039

(Corresponding author: Mamta Chhabra Sharma)

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**ABSTRACT:** Nature does not distinguish between men/women or rural/urban. Disaster is an issue that affects the lives of all human beings that includes men and women both. As the magnitude of a disaster is partially influenced by the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts, putting gender into main stream of disaster-reduction policies and measures relates to the ways in which women and men are positioned in society like India. Though women are vital parts of operative cultures, with conventional roles and rules yet they are vulnerable. The susceptibility of women trunks from socio-political, and economic conditions prevailing. Indian women in particular are more vulnerable to disaster and have a marginal role to play in its management. Efforts to make women's voice more audible would enable the effective mapping, not only of the variable ways in which the lives of women and men may be adversely affected, but also of the ways in which they can contribute to disaster-reduction efforts.

**Key Words:** Disaster, Gender Vulnerability, Socio-Cultural Patterns, Collective

### I. INTRODUCTION

The present gender dynamics between men and women in disaster management have everything to do with the roles and responsibilities women and men have at home and in society. These roles are due to different identities, social responsibilities, attitudes, and expectations. Such differences are most of the time unfavourable to women and lead to gender inequality cutting across all socioeconomic development, including differences in vulnerabilities to disasters, viz., pre, post and during disasters. In developing countries like India, it goes without saying that women are more vulnerable to the effects of disasters like floods, earthquake etc. than men primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources. Rural women have limited access to secure and better paid jobs in the formal sector. They are mostly occupied in the informal sector, making less money, with less employment security. They are poorly nourished. Two third of the illiterates in the world are women. Crucially, women's limited access to information and knowledge inevitably increases disaster vulnerability and risk of women. Lower levels of education hamper the access of fairer sex towards information, and limit their ability to prepare and respond to disasters. In the case of the 1991 Bangladesh Cyclone, warning information was transmitted by men to men in public spaces, meaning women did not receive information directly (Genanet, 2004; Canon, 2002).

### II. STATISTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN

A recent study of 141 countries found that more women than men die from natural hazards, and that this disparity is linked to the poor socio-economic status of women. Statistics from past disasters including the Indian Ocean Tsunami and the 1991 Bangladesh Cyclone have showed women overrepresented in mortality rates. During the 2006 tsunami, more women died than men – for example in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, male survivors outnumber female survivors by 3 or 4 to 1. To make the matter worse they face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity. Swimming is not a skill, girls and women are encouraged to learn in some cultures. In some regions women's clothing limits their mobility. In some societies and cultures, women cannot respond to warnings or leave the house without a male companion. Majority of the women folk irrespective of caste, creed and religion have unequal access to resources and to decision-making processes. Based on studies conducted on disaster risk reduction, such marginalization of women is especially true at the national level. In day today life, women are key victims as well as resilient forces to natural disasters. On the contrary, in disaster management and actions, women's voices are lost or inadequately addressed (Aguilar, 2004; Basnet, 2008; Boender & Thaxton, 2004; Cabrera *et al.*, 2001; Daniell, 2007; Dankelman *et al.*, 2004, 2008; Davis *et al.*, 2005; FAO, n.a.; Nanzala, 2008; Neumayer &

Plumper, 2007; Oglethorpe & Gelman, 2004; Sillitoe, 2003; Thomalla, Cannon, Huq, Klein, & Schaerer, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2004)

### III. INHERENT RISK BEARING CAPACITY & SOCIO- ECONOMIC STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN

In developing countries like India, women's traditional role is to look after and protect children and the elderly as well as their family's domestic property when men migrate for jobs. During seasonal disasters, women's intensive domestic roles mean they have demonstrated excellent risk management and coping skills. However, limits on women's social roles can also often mean that they lack skills needed to survive major catastrophes, such as swimming, climbing, understanding and responding to warning signals, or participating in disaster prevention. Most Bengali women have never learned to swim (Genanet, 2004; Neumayer and Plumper, 2007).

#### A. Risk Assessment

The magnitude of the risk in terms of gender relations can be accessed by the equation below:

$$RISK = \frac{\text{Hazard} \times \text{Vulnerability by Gender}}{\text{Coping Capacity by Gender}}$$

As can be interpreted from the above equation, risk depends on three factors:

- Hazards
- Vulnerability
- Coping capacity

Hazards are a natural phenomenon and we as humans have no control on them. However the vulnerability can be decreased and coping capacity can be increased on the basis of analysis of damage experienced in disasters. A historical analysis of disaster data provides a valuable information to deduce levels of risk based on past experiences.

Thus it is important to identify gender-sensitive strategies to respond to the environmental and humanitarian crises caused by natural disasters. For this one need not be a superwoman who confronts for survival nor a poor and defenceless woman who could not do anything except wait and watch. One has the right to dream of a society of which both man and woman are part and have the same rights, education and options to manage, both in "normal" times, as well as when a disaster strikes. A few examples from Central America, India and the Pacific illustrate how women's action shows a way forward (Anderson, C. 2002). Paradoxically several studies do confirm, however, that women are usually much more badly affected than men when a disaster strikes, and when recovery begins. We therefore need to address the specific issues of Indian women already in the initial stages of designing disaster-reduction policies and measures. As there is a gender-based division of labour, men and women perform different jobs/tasks. In the event of disaster, there will be an alteration in what they can do, exposing men and women to different risks and opportunities. Men and women have different access to resources, including physical resources like land, social resources like networks, and financial resources like income-generating work and credit.

#### B. Thrust Areas

The various thrust areas are:

- More locally-based knowledge on gender-disaster management links need to be explored. An understanding of local gender dynamics is essential because gender roles are very different across culture, class, ethnicity, income, education, and time.
  - We need to address adaptation of the two genders when the disaster strikes;
  - How the two can complement each other in disaster situations;
  - How their roles can change pre-, post- and during the disaster.
- Action on the gender dimension of disaster management is needed at the policymaking level. As there is a degree of uncertainty about the impacts of disaster, global, national and most important local preparations for the range of possible impacts must incorporate the gender dimension of disaster management. The cross cutting issues of gender and disaster reduction combined with studies on the biophysical aspects should be continuously fed into the formulation of people-centred climate change adaptation strategies and policies. This incorporation can bring men's and women's existing knowledge and coping mechanisms.
- In times of change, we need to have different options and 'safety nets' for coping with change. Based on their distinct roles, women and men have different sets of knowledge and skills and recognizing their contributions will result in a wider range of options for preparing for and coping with change.

### IV. OBSERVATIONS

#### A. Effect of Disasters on Women

(i) Women are highly vulnerable to catastrophes' both pre and post disasters as they have gender specific needs in each phase. There are a large number of causes that can account for increased vulnerability of the female gender, during calamities.

Nature of Vulnerability/Susceptibility	Factors Responsible
Financial Susceptibility	Lack of access to (hold of) financial resources
Social Susceptibility	Destruction of ancient societal patterns
Educational Susceptibility	Lack of access to educational resources/ high illiteracy rate among women
Organizational Susceptibility	Lack of access to protection given at National and State level
Attitudinal Susceptibility	Lack of Public Awareness
Cultural Susceptibility	Primitive Customs and Beliefs
Physical Susceptibility	Lack of physical strength due to poor nourishment

(ii) The plight of women as helpless victims is attributed to many social and cultural reasons apart from their biological weakness. It has been noted that immediately after the disaster many a times women are bartered for food incase sufficient relief does not pour in. In the later stage post disaster, it is very common to sell off young girls to older men, under the guise of marrying them which is pre dominantly done to ward off poverty inflicted on families post a disaster.

(iii) On occurrence of a disaster women are expected to continue playing role of family nurturer, taking care of food, shelter and other needs of their family even when they are physically, mentally and emotionally thin. The stress caused by the trauma and added responsibility due to traditional role of self sacrifice for common good takes a toll on their emotional and physical health. Though it is a common thought that men are physically, mentally and emotionally stronger, statistics prove that in times of calamity, women turn out to be more stronger and are capable of thinking long term perspective when compared to their male counterparts, who focus more on the solution of problem at hand as the end itself.

(iv) It has been observed that on occurrence of a disaster, women tend to lose their social support structure that they need at that time. In event of loss of a spouse, they have increased responsibility of taking care of the children and the elderly both in terms of a bread earner and a protector. With increased responsibility to shoulder on, their vulnerability to ills of society increases making them prey to flesh and sweat traders.

**The physical problems that women face at time of disasters can be explained as:**

- Sleep Disorders
- Gynecological Problems
- Miscarriages, Pains, Aches, Lack of Menstrual Hygiene
- Physical Impairments
- Rapes, Molestation

**The emotional problems that women face at time of disasters can be explained as:**

- Anxiety, Fear
- Humiliation, Shame
- Anger, Denial
- Disbelief, Listlessness

**Socio economic problems that women face during disasters can be explained as:**

- Dealing with responsibilities of new roles like being a widow, head of family, Single parent
- Feeling stigmatized
- Discontinuity of life routines
- Lack of monetary resources needed for sustenance

(v) The present study tries to find out problems faced by women during various major natural disasters that have affected our country in past years, and roles played by them in fighting their way through the calamity. Due to their inherent mental and emotional strength, women are able to cope up with aftermaths of disasters early in comparison to the male folk as can be seen by the un precedent role played by them during various natural calamities in India and across the globe. In many states like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, local women with help of governmental organizations participated in relief programmes after occurrence of earthquakes. They made various collective groups to learn as well as impart skills needed to sail through the perils of disaster, with both immediate and long term perspectives. In devastating *earthquake of Latur* (1993), women contributed in repair and reconstruction of damaged houses which is usually a males' domain. They were seen witnessing similar role after the historic *earthquake of Bhuj* (2001) which caused great destruction of life and property. Many N.G.O.'s working in the field share similar experiences of common women rising with strength beyond means to nurture their own families and others at after the devastating *earthquake of Nepal*, *cloud burst in Uttarakhand* and *Tsunami in Indian Ocean*, all of which took a massive toll on life and property.

- In early 1980's, an N.G.O. 'Swayam Shikshan Prayog' had initiated a program in collaboration with efforts of government and U.N.I.C.E.F. to build capacities of women in alleviation of poverty inflicted post a disaster. At present, spread across 900 districts, the total women trained and engaged in outreach programs have crossed over 22000 across the country, addressing pressing needs such as sanitation, health, social infrastructure, credit availability, food, shelter etc. These women were taught and in turn they taught how to

construct bridges for escape during a disaster, swimming as a life skill where they could protect their lives and others', techniques of construction of houses that could sustain tremors. These women informed, motivated and ensured that people understand and utilize skills and techniques both pre and post a disaster to prevent damage during an onslaught.

- ❖ During the *Gujarat earthquake of 2011*, with Bhuj being the epicenter, there was massive destruction of men and material, with Kutch region accounting for more than 90% of the total loss. Thousands were stranded homeless, without food, water or security. Disease and impairment was high and relief from the government was not enough. The women folk with help of their counterparts in neighboring state of Maharashtra rose to take charge of revival and re structuring of the region. They acquired life sustaining skills and motivated others not just women but the elder and children to learn skills that would help them survive a disaster. They collectively formed groups, voiced the nourishment and special sanitation needs of women in public communities, facilitating dialogue between their communities and government officials. More than 2,50,000 households were directly involved in earthquake safe construction in the affected regions of Gujarat and Latur. To revive families from financial dependency, many around 1500 women started their businesses at cottage level and around 1000 women groups work on upliftment of women in disaster affected areas in various parts of the country on health, sanitation and livelihood front.
- ❖ Similarly, the *Tsunami in Indian Ocean* took a toll of over 12000 people displacing more than 6,00,000 families and injured many in state of Tamil Nadu, which was the worst hit. As per survey conducted by national relief agencies, the death toll of women was around 2400 as compared to 1800 male deaths, showing the vulnerability of women exposed to such dangers. The survivors reminisce that most of the women died as they were trying to protect the children and elderly of the family. Also, in the traditional *meenavar* (fishing) community, women were debarred from entering the sea and never learnt how to swim, which could have saved many. The tsunami exposed sheer dependency of women on men of the house and their helplessness disabling them to protect themselves in times of distress. The women in Tamil Nadu were not as quipped as the women folk of Gujarat to tackle the disaster, as a result of which their vulnerability both short and long term increased manifolds. Many of them became widows or orphans losing interest in life and falling easy prey to crimes against them in form sexual assaults both by outsiders and family members, adding to their woes. There were increased instances of domestic violence with added responsibility of winning day to day needs, since men were not able to find employment due to massive destruction of property and business. Women even faced problems in claiming compensation from government agencies due to non availability of supporting documents and lack of information on legal matters, since women were included in decision process in patriarchal system. As a result they were unaware of most the details needed to be furnished for claiming relief and their houses back. The village authorities also played unscrupulous role in equating needs of women as less to that of men. For example, according to a report women were given only half the compensation as compared to men, and in another case mechanized boats given to women by government were taken away by the village authorities who opined that women should not work outside their homes, even after the pressing needs after the tsunami. They considered financial empowerment of females as a direct threat to their patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, again as their female counterparts of Gujarat, many N.G.O.'s played a pivotal role in enhancement of status of women in society. They initiated programs to train women about their rights, legal procedures and to take up crafts to ensure them financial dependence, and bring their families out of despair. Women in turn worked in groups and motivated other weaker sections to take up livelihoods and learn life saving skills to protect them, if in case need so arises, providing strength and hope of a secure future.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In disaster reduction strategies and actions, women and gender equality issues are substantially side lined and marginalised, leading to ineffective relief, rise in violations of women's rights including violence against women, and compromises in results of disaster reduction activities. It is very unfortunate that women are more likely to be regarded as a vulnerable group, rather than as leaders and contributors to building disaster resilience at national and local levels. It is critical to ensure that women are not adversely burdened and made more vulnerable by changing responsibilities during disaster, that inequalities between the two genders are not increased and to identify opportunities that can collectively reduce vulnerability and enhance adaptive capacity.

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