

Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction Issues in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh is a disaster prone country and one of the highest (fifth) in rank of the risk index around the world. Due to its fragile geographical location within South Asia and other human induced causes, the country is visited by frequent disasters such as floods, cyclone, thunderstorm, riverbank erosion etc. Slow onset disasters such as drought arsenic contamination in ground water, water logging, salinity intrusion and others are making the country a vulnerable one. Bangladesh also falls in the earthquake zone and trying to be prepared to face the possible disaster.

Prior to the Independence of Bangladesh, major focus on disaster related issues was given to disaster control rather than management, which became visible after the two consecutive floods on 1987 and 1988. Almost all the structural measures (adopted following the report of J. A. Krugg Commission) taken to “control” floods since 1956, collapsed. This has attracted international attention and Bangladesh has been identified as less prepared country to face disasters. There was no institutional mechanism for disaster management till late nineties (Disaster Management Bureau established). A Standing Order on Disasters (SOD)² has been published in 1997 for assigning different roles to different institutions from local to central levels. A comprehensive disaster management program has launched later on. Formulation of different disaster management policies, plans and legislations have been initiated. However, although since mid nineties pioneering research on disaster recorded, peoples’ own initiatives, especially women’s disaster coping mechanisms (Nasreen, 1995; 2012), gender dimensions in disasters have not been integrated into disaster risk management policies.

Gradually gender in Bangladesh was recognized as a cross cutting issue but was not mainstreamed into disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes in the past. Academia, different international and national non-government organizations, activists integrated gender issues in their policy frameworks. In 2011 the Women Advancement Policy (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, GoB) included a section on women and children in disaster for the first time. A project was implemented by the Directorate of Women Affairs (DWA, MoWCA) and a Gender Toolkit on DRR³ has been prepared in 2015 with the support of CDMP.

It is relevant to mention here that Bangladesh has been proactively responding to the international policies on disaster risk reduction aligning with Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA, 2005-2015) to build a disaster resilient community. However, the Interim Report on HFA Progress in 2011 indicates that South Asian countries lack an inclusive focus, especially gender dimension in disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts. In the same year two days long Gender and DRR Workshop has been organized at the University

¹ The author acknowledges the encouragements of Professor Maureen Fordham and Ms. Dilruba Haider

² <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/idrl/883EN.pdf>

³ Developed in Bangla by Mahbuba Nasreen. Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, University of Dhaka

of Dhaka⁴. In this workshop for the first time government, academia, development partners, international and national NGOs shared their experiences on working with gender and DRR issues. It has been identified that many activities of different organizations focusing on gender issues but in isolation. It has also been identified that government and non-government organizations should work on mainstreaming gender issues in their activities such as risk assessment, early warning, information management; education and training.

It must be mentioned here that the theme of the International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction (IDDR) of UNISDR in 2012 was Women & Girls - The inVisible Force of Resilience⁵ which initiated wide level national and international consultations to incorporate gender issues in post 2015 agenda. Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) celebrated the event with a view to incorporating gender issues in policy frameworks. Special issue on the DRR theme incorporating gender and DRR has also been published by the MoDMR. Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies organized rally and seminar on the theme to raise awareness.

Being requested by the Regional Programme Officer for South Asia Gender Focal Point of UNISDR, the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, University of Dhaka in collaboration with Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme of Bangladesh, organized a Round Table with Government and national and international agencies, where the Gender Focal Point of UNISDR (through Skype) pointed out that gender and social inclusion issues need to be included in the post 2015 UNISDR framework. Following such wide range of consultations in different forums across the world government of all member countries have agreed to incorporate gender issues in policy frameworks. The result of such discussions has been reflected in the Sendai Framework of Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR, 2015-2030). However, implementation of listed activities with appropriate budgetary allocation is counted to be crucial in taking them from 'paper-plan syndrome' only.

Bangladesh is relentlessly trying to promote the gender and DRR agenda in disaster within South Asia and has received global recognition for gender mainstreaming efforts in Disaster Risk Reduction⁶. One of the crucial agenda items for Bangladesh is that DRR needs to be completely incorporated with climate change agenda. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina receives prestigious Champion of the Earth Award for her outstanding contributions in reducing the impacts of climate change towards building a resilient nation. This has to be upheld with the combined efforts of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and Ministry of Environment and Forest, other line ministries, development partners, International and national organizations, researchers and all other people. It is worth mentioning that the Sectoral inputs on climate change and disaster management towards the formulation of Seventh Five Year Plan (2016 – 2021) has been given jointly and reviewed through gender lens⁷. The Gender Action Plan (ccGAP)⁸ has been prepared based on the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, second pillar (out of six pillars) of which is comprehensive disaster management. The Bangladesh National Conservation

⁴ Lead by Professor Mahbuba Nasreen and sponsored by SIDA

⁵ 2012 <http://www.unisdr.org/2012/iddr/>

⁶ Prof. Mahbuba Nasreen received the 'Mary Fran Myers Award, 2016' of Gender and Disaster Network from the Colorado University (Boulder), USA

⁷ Ahmed, Ahsan Uddin, Saleemul Haq, Mahbuba Nasreen and Abu Wali Raghieb Hassan. (2015). Sectoral inputs towards the formulation of Seventh Five Year Plan (2016 – 2021) CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT. Sponsored by UNWOMEN and UNDP. http://www.plancomm.gov.bd/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/11a_Climate-Change-and-Disaster-Management.pdf

⁸ **Ministry** of Environment and Forest, GoB, (2013). Bangladesh Climate Change Gender Action Plan (ccGAP). <https://portals.iucn.org/union/sites/union/files/doc/bangladesh.pdf>

Strategy, 2017 dedicated a complete section on Gender Issues.⁹ Moreover, almost of the capacity building initiatives of GoB and other organizations have been giving more emphasis on gender issues in general and relevant organizations on gender and DRR in particular. Academic institutions have been incorporating gender and DRR issues in their curriculums. Despite several attempts, gender and DRR related activities often remain in limited profile, especially women are viewed from vulnerability perspective and not from resilience perspective. This is related to their given gender identity and not to any inherent weaknesses.

With the existing disasters (be it natural hazard or human induced), recently Bangladesh is facing a social disaster, a protracted crisis of Rohingya refugee entrance in Bangladesh. Government of Bangladesh received world recognition for her humanitarian response through giving shelter to the Rohingyas of Rakhaine State of Myanmar, who have fled their homes to escape violence and taken refuge in Bangladesh. The ethnic cleansing in Myanmar started since ages, for which around 400,000 Rohingyas have taken refuge in Bangladesh earlier. The number of newly arrived Rohingya reached 600,000 (as of 23 October, 2017) and some more are expected to be arriving. Of all the uprooted people of Myanmar, 70 percent are women and children. They are narrating stories of violence against them to national and international humanitarian actors and others. As of Bangladesh, the international community is constantly arguing that the Aung San Suu Kyi led Myanmar government must stop violence against women, children and men and must take the Rohingyas back to their own land. Being a small country and less prepared to accommodate such a large number of refugee at a time, Bangladesh has been facing new challenges of human induced disaster management. Immediate attention is required to ensure women's and children's security, and health safety, for both the refugees as well as the local residents. Government and other actors in the fields of disasters are now focusing on Rohingya issues as this would help to reduce new disasters such as epidemics or gender based violence and relevant other disasters.

The Gender and Disaster Network (GDN) has been contributing towards ensuring gender equity in disaster risk management around the world. A GDN hub in Bangladesh will add a new agenda and value to GDN.

⁹ Nasreen, Mahbuba. (2017). BANGLADESH NATIONAL CONSERVATION STRATEGY. <http://www.ncsbd.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/17.-Gender-Issues.pdf>