

Bangladesh: Gender Mainstreaming Processes in Community-based Flood Risk Management

Challenges

In Bangladesh, household and community responses to extreme recurring events such as floods are an indicator of the extent of their vulnerability, their level of capacity to cope with the event and the intensity of the hazard. The better informed people are ahead of time, the better they can prepare for the hazard and reduce the risk of damage in their community.

Flood preparedness is to a large extent dependent on two elements: first, the ability of relevant national, local and community institutions to orchestrate communication; and second, determining and prioritizing the content of communications on the basis of user needs and priorities. The lead time of the traditional hydrologic forecasts is very short, and local people do not understand danger-level terminology. There is no mechanism to relate forecast information to user needs at specific locations.

Men and women have different capacities and vulnerabilities in regards to information dissemination due to their different roles and conditions. Therefore, they are affected by disaster differently. In many contexts, men are better connected to early warning mechanisms due to their movement in public spaces and access to various channels of communication, such as radio and TV, informal community networks and interaction with officials. Women have limited access to information and knowledge related to disaster risks in their communities as they are more active in the home and thus have less mobility in the community and understand hazards less. Women's voices are barely heard regarding risk reduction in policy and decision-making processes.

Programme/Projects

In early 2004, the Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), together with other national agencies, took the initiative to implement a project on flood vulnerability, risk reduction and better preparedness through a community-based information system in a flood-prone zone. It included an analysis of the impact of gender mainstreaming on the flood risk programme in relation to reduced vulnerability and risk. The objective was to identify best practices regarding flood preparedness, information dissemination, especially to women at home, and vulnerability and risk reduction.

The process began by organizing a sensitization meeting at a local government institute with the participation of NGOs and the Disaster Mitigation Group (DMI) to identify men's and women's needs. Research was carried out using interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and open-ended discussions to identify their specific needs. The process was pre-tested in the field and then implemented. There was a 98 per cent response rate for the household survey done by CEGIS.

As a result of this research, which was done in preparation for that year's monsoon season, new forms of communicating flood information were tested. The danger level for river flow was set for every village. Flood warnings in the local language were prepared using different media, including posters, photographs and audio tapes. These were selected as ways of strengthening local institutions and providing access to information, in particular to illiterate people, regarding such activities as evacuating cattle, crop and emergency food preparedness and organizing boats for evacuation.

Outcomes

In the 2004 flood, men and women in the community studied benefited greatly from new mechanisms introduced, such as the flag network, microphones in mosques and drum beating. Some women in the community said that they are now trying to understand the flag network and the importance of flood warning information.

Responses to the programme:

Padma Rani, said that timely messages which address the concerns of women in the village could enable them to prepare for floods. *“I can store dry food, my poultry, shift my paddy and raise my plinth level if I understand the language of the forecast.”*

Omar Sultan was concerned with saving his stock of paddy (about 150 mounds) at a higher location and was about to invest in moving it as the water was rising every day. But when he saw the white flag of the warning system (meaning water level decreasing), he did not shift it. He was able save his investment on shifting. *“We understand the flag network warning system and it is helpful”.*

Key Factors for Success

- *Gender analysis framework:* The framework was developed to study various community-wide patterns related to disasters that could be analysed in the context of gender. These included traditional gender roles, access to and control of means of communication and other resources and impacts of the disaster that differed by gender, before, during and after the event.
- *Additional frameworks:* After the gender analysis framework provided insight into gender and disasters, the Harvard analytical and the access and control frameworks were used to make women’s roles visible in risk management.

Main Obstacles

- *Forecasts not adapted locally:* All of the men and women involved in the survey said that they were unable to relate to the forecasts as they were not adapted to their local situation. Either the language and the metric system were alien to their culture or the information provided about the river water was not helpful on the flood plain.
- *Gender disparity in information reception:* In general, women receive very little information in comparison to men before and during floods as they are busy taking care of children, collecting drinking water, and preserving seeds, fuel, food and cash. Men have greater access to warning information because of their interpersonal communication with others and their access to radios and TV.

Looking Ahead - Sustainability and Transferability

In order to continue disaster risk reduction in other locations, two roles need to be successfully fulfilled:

- *Community:* The community is imperative to disaster risk reduction. Community members are the key actors as well as the primary beneficiaries of disaster risk reduction.
- *Government:* National and local government agencies must engage and encourage women to participate along with men in implementing flood preparedness measures. They should take into account the different roles and needs of men and women, while planning all stages of disaster preparedness, relief, and rehabilitation. To aid this effort, gender mainstreaming in flood risk reduction needs to be institutionalized.

Further Information

- Contact the researcher:
S.H.M. Fakhruddin
suddin@cegisbd.com
- For information about the Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services: <http://www.cegisbd.com>
- For information about Riverside Technology, Inc.:

<http://www.riverside.com>

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