

Integrating Gender Sensitive Approach in to Disaster Management – A Case Study of Kolkata Slum

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ABSTRACT: *Natural hazard in itself is not a disaster, although it has the potential to become one. Natural hazard turns into a disaster when it interacts with populations without adequate capacities to respond to it. For instance, in the event of flood, a person who can swim is less at risk of drowning than a person who cannot. The lack of capacities is not predestined but they are the consequence of prevailing social, economic, and political inequalities. These adverse consequences are known as vulnerabilities. The risks and vulnerabilities that people face from natural disasters are as much a product of their social situation as their physical environment. Vulnerabilities and capacities of individuals and social groups evolve over time and determine people's abilities to cope with disaster and recover from it. Social networks, power relationships, knowledge and skills, gender roles, health, wealth, and location, all affect risk and vulnerability to disasters and the capacity to respond to them. There is enough evidence that in any disaster, disproportionately large numbers of women are affected more severely relative to men. Worldwide, it has generally been established that when gender issues are not addressed fully or sufficiently, in both development and disaster contexts, they perpetuate and in many instances augment existing gender-based inequities. In this paper the author has tried to understand the importance of gender sensitive approaches while formulating and coping with disaster management strategies and planning. The authors have suggested some approaches which become vital while formulating disaster management taking into account of females who turn to be most vulnerable during such events. The study highlights the scenario of Indira Palli Slum near Brace Bridge railway station which recently faced fire hazard as a case study.*

Keywords: *Slums, Natural & Manmade Hazards, Disaster Management, Gender sensitive approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationships between men and women are powerful forces in every culture. The way these relationships are defined creates differences in the roles and responsibilities of men and women. It also leads to inequalities in their access to, and control over, resources (who inherits land or can get credit from the bank) and decision-making powers (who has a voice and sits on community councils and committees). The combined effect of these differences and inequalities means that women and girls, and men and boys face different types and levels of exposure and vulnerability to natural hazard risks and disaster impacts. Gender based behaviours and stereotypes about what men and women can and cannot do further contribute to gender differences, sometimes with devastating consequences. Yet, attention to gender is consistently one of the weakest areas of humanitarian responses [1]. Women and girls generally tend to be the main victims of natural disasters. A few commonly recorded reasons for higher death tolls among women and girls include:

- Cultural constraints on female mobility which hinder self-rescue, for example, women may not leave the home without male permission, they may be reluctant to seek shelter because shared communal facilities do not have separate, private spaces for women or clothing may have been damaged.
- Lack of skills such as swimming or tree climbing, which are traditionally taught to males.
- Less physical strength than males, in part due to biological differences but, in some countries, also due to the effects of prolonged nutritional deficiencies caused by less access to food than men and boys.

- Particularly in slums poverty is known to be a key factor in the vulnerability of both men and women during hazardous events, but there can be gender differences among poor people that further compound their risks. For instance, poor women may have heightened vulnerability to hazardous events that occur during the daytime, as many live in unsafe areas and houses and tend to spend more time indoors and near the house than their male relations. As men usually form the majority of poor migrant labourers, their wives and children, as well as older people remaining in the family home, may be more exposed to the impacts of local disasters.

If gender issues are addressed with sensitivity to disaster management, it can contribute to boosting the economy, reducing the disaster-related psychological and domestic burdens of men, and promoting the safety, prosperity and decision-making power of women [2].

II. OBJECTIVES

The present study mainly focuses on the importance of gender analysis in formulation of disaster planning guidelines. The following objectives have been framed for the present study:

- To understand why females including children and old aged people tend to be most affected during any disaster or any hazardous event.
- To identify the factors responsible for the outbreak of fire hazard in Indira Palli slum region.
- To explore the problems and constraints faced by the slum dwellers particularly females, children and aged people after the disaster.
- To suggest some measures of disaster management with special emphasis to gender rehabilitation and rescue.

III. METHODOLOGY

Present study is based on the conceptual framework of the different approaches which should be incorporated while planning any disaster management in a region affected by a disaster. Slum as an unit of study has been taken into account as these habitations are not only unhealthy and unsafe for the people but also very much vulnerable to the occurrences of several hazards both natural and man-made like fire, water logging, flood, occurrences of diseases, crime, malnutrition etc. The authors have made an attempt to explain the possible causes which had led to a devastating fire hazard in the Indira Palli slum, which had gutted almost all the hutments about 350 in number. Primary survey was conducted by the authors after the disaster to visualize and understand the problems faced by the female slum dwellers. From the information gathered the authors have tried to suggest some proposals for gender sensitive approaches to incorporate in the disaster management.

IV. DISCUSSION AND OBSERVATIONS

Disaster is viewed as a crisis event which outstrips the capacity of a society to manage or cope with it at least for a time. The occurrence of natural disaster and vulnerability of a section of population depends upon a set of prevailing conditions composed of physical and socio-economic factors which increases a community's susceptibility to calamity or which adversely affect its ability to respond to events. Slums are most vulnerable to different disaster due to poor infrastructural conditions along with poverty and illiteracy. Slums are susceptible to different environmental and social hazards and disasters like water-logging, fire, epidemic, mal-nutrition, crime, drug addiction, trafficking etc. Indira Palli Slum situated near Brace Bridge railway station in Ward Number 80 under Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority had experienced a devastating fire hazard on 13th January, 2016. About 350 hutments were blazed totally by the outbreak of fire. According to the fire office the fire spread from a kitchen in one of the hutments. The probable factors which led the fire outbreak turned into a disaster may be outlined as following:

- The slum locality was mostly made up of inflammable substances like tarpaulin and plastic as a result the fire spread quickly. Most of the houses (more than 90 %) in the Slum are of kutcha type were made up of plastic, bamboo and tarpaulin.
- The average number of persons living in a room was more than 6 in almost all the hutments. This is not only unhealthy and unhygienic but was also very much vulnerable at the time of the disaster.
- Water supply of the locality was generally from the community tap which was located near the main road. According to the residents the water supply was more than 150 metres away from their dwelling. As a result initial displacement of fire took some time.
- Road approaching the slum was as narrow as 4 feet. This made more inconvenience to the entry of the fire tenders.
- Most of the pathways within the slums were narrow and not suitable for the entry of emergency vehicles at the time of fire hazard.
- More over the inner lanes of the slums were used generally for domestic purpose like cooking, bathing, recreation, sleeping etc. which made people more difficult to evacuate at the time of hazard.



Though there were no life casualties but there was huge loss of property and assets of the poor slum dwellers. Almost all the hutments were destroyed and people were left homeless within two hours of fire outbreak. The problems faced by the dwellers especially by the females, children and aged people are as following:

- No shelter as almost 350 huts was blazed due to the fire outbreak. People were forced to displace to the nearest railway station.
- Lack of food especially food items for the children like milk.
- No drinking water available to the slum dwellers.
- Non availability of toilet facilities.
- Shortage of warm clothes and blankets.
- Lack of security to women and children.
- Disruption of life and livelihood.
- Health problems like breathing and respiratory problems seen among the children and old aged people.



Photo Plates showing the plight of the Indira Palli Slum Dwellers after the Fire Disaster (Source: Authors)

V. SUGGESTIVE GENDER SENSITIVE APPROACHES

Thus when disaster strikes it affects in particularly the weaker sections like females, children and old aged people. So there is utmost importance to have an integrated and holistic approach for better management

of any kind of disaster. Disaster Management Cycle stresses on the activities undertaken before, during and after a disaster has taken place. **Disaster Management Cycle**[3] [4] consists of three approaches or segments as following:

5.1 Disaster Response

It refers to the actions which must be initiated immediately when the disaster strikes in an area. The need to act fast when providing disaster relief should be administered with careful planning and a sound understanding of the local context in order to be appropriate and equitable. Women and minority groups frequently have less social, economic and political power and are not represented in formal leadership structures as a result they are often deprived from the relief operations. Following measures should be included in disaster response approach:

- Disaster management team should have an idea about the area affected. This can be possible by collecting data on the age, gender and diversity of the affected population during emergency needs - assessments. Conduct separate interviews with a cross-section of affected men and women and compare the two sets of results when planning relief assistance.
- Ensure that needs-assessment and response teams are gender and diversity balanced. Make certain that procedures for relief registration and distribution do not accidentally exclude women or vulnerable and marginalized groups or individuals, for example households headed by women or the disabled. Beneficiaries solely based on male heads of household should be avoided.
- To design emergency and transitional shelters and support services like toilets, water supply and lighting that are responsive to the socio-cultural and economic needs and preferences should be identified by both affected men and women keeping in mind the privacy and safety considerations.
- Studies have shown that the location and set-up of shelters can affect both the perceived and actual safety of those displaced by a disaster. Locating shelters close to the original home where ever feasible provides extra safety due to intimacy with the shelter's physical surroundings, in addition to the broader benefits of facilitating earlier rebuilding and recovery.
- Encouraging communities to stay together in shelter areas has similar advantages: the community can be a source of strength and support and often maintains an internal policing system that can offer additional security. Furthermore, women are often in charge of collecting firewood and water, and are therefore particularly affected by the security of access routes to these resources.
- To provide both male and female health personnel and regular checkup facilities for children and women.
- The spacing and design of shelters is important in ensuring adequate privacy for female members of households from neighbours or passersby.
- Secure doors and adequate lighting can be important factors in safety. Cooking, bathing and toilet arrangements also need to be adequate, safe and culturally appropriate. This requires participation by both male and female beneficiaries in designing such facilities.
- If it is not possible to provide individual household sanitation facilities, then bathing areas and toilets should be segregated by sex. Female and male bathing areas should be placed at some distance from each other and near areas with adequate lighting.

5.2 Disaster Recovery

The impact of a disaster or crisis can be reduced if the situation is stabilized as quickly as possible, allowing people to start rebuilding their lives and communities. Recovery should also be carried out in such a way as to rebuild more inclusive societies and reduce vulnerability to future disasters, making recovering communities safer than before. The following measures should be taken as a part of disaster recovery:

- The roles women play in contributing to a household's food security or income, whether as family members or heads of the household, need to be understood, and livelihood recovery activities should

be designed that meet their needs, in addition to those of the men in the household. This is especially the case when households were already poor, were particularly affected by the disaster, or had their coping mechanisms badly eroded.

- One of the most important areas of post-disaster recovery programming for both men and women is the restoration of economic opportunities or the development of new livelihood opportunities to replace those that were lost. This can include diversifying household income sources to strengthen resilience to future hazards.
- Recovery processes can include disaster preparedness and risk reduction activities that assist in building community resilience towards future disasters. Undertaking these activities during a recovery process is highly favourable, as people currently affected by a disaster are usually highly motivated to learn new ways of protecting themselves.

5.3 Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation

It refers to community-based disaster risk reduction and preparedness starts by working with communities to map the most significant locally prevalent natural and human-made hazards and to understand their patterns of vulnerability [5]. It is also important to have a strong understanding of community demographics and existing social capital. Much of this information can be collected by undertaking community Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments. From these, communities can devise local ways to manage hazards and reduce their exposure and vulnerability. Following general measures can be considered particularly in slum area which is susceptible to various disasters like water-logging, epidemic, fire etc:

- Maintenance of approach roads and pathways within the slums is necessary
- Widening of the pathways within the slums necessary for emergency services
- Provision for additional security lights is necessary
- Regular de-silting of the drains is necessary to reduce water logging problem
- Provision for alternative source of water is required mainly in the commercial and densely populated areas.
- Replacement of old sewer lines is necessary
- Provision for separate toilets in these areas is necessary
- Minimum electricity charge for the slum dwellers to reduce hooking / illegal connection
- Provision of vat/bin
- Awareness of residents about the different types of hazards they are vulnerable.
- Convincing local government officials and community leaders to fully involve both women and men from communities in disaster management activities and decision-making.
- GIS Mapping techniques may be used for planning purpose and mitigation of a disaster.

VI. CONCLUSION

The above discussion makes an attempt to understand the necessity of community participation with proper representation of different groups and sections of the society. Such collective participation helps to highlight the different aspects of the problem, need and mitigation proposals which may not be possible if all the groups are not taken into consideration. Thus incorporating gender enhances better implementation of disaster management planning.

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