

Integrating Gender Issues in Mitigation and Management of Disaster in India

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Abstract

India is a diverse country having different kinds of natural hazards such as drought in Rajasthan, cyclone in coastal belt and floods in plains. Gender as a category in the analysis of pre-disaster and post-disaster situation has emerged recently with the critique of the development paradigm of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Gender is a central organizing principle in social life and hence in disaster-affected communities, yet gender issues are rarely examined by disaster scholars or practitioners. The centrality of vulnerability analysis needs to be emphasized at all stages of disasters; preparedness, mitigation, management, relief and rehabilitation. Since this paper analyzes gender as the basis for different effects of disaster on men and women, it is imperative to understand the socio-economic and cultural context that create and maintain women's vulnerabilities to disasters. Since women's vulnerabilities and capacities are different due to their socio-economic position in rural and backward society, the effects of disaster are also different for women. Awareness of the cultural context that limits women's opportunities to develop their capacities for disaster survival also facilitates recognition of gender-based disaster impact as well as the need to incorporate gender analysis and gender sensitivity in planning and implementing relief and mitigation rehabilitation programmes.

Keywords: North Bihar, Vulnerable, Disaster, Gender, Women, Management.

1. Introduction

The term “gender” refers to the socially-constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for a person based on his or her assigned sex at birth. Understanding the gender implications and facets of natural disasters and climate change is critical to effective disaster risk management practices that enable communities and countries to be disaster resilient. All women, men, girls and boys do not face the same needs and vulnerabilities in the face of natural disasters and climate change; there are differences within each group and between individuals regarding specific protection concerns and capacities – for example, people with mental or physical disabilities, minorities and indigenous populations, the elderly, chronically ill, unaccompanied children, child headed household, female-headed households, widows, etc. – and over time throughout the disaster and post-disaster phases. Various factors, including social, economic, ethnic, cultural and physiological factors, affect not only the ways that disasters impact women, men, girls and boys, but also their coping strategies and their participation in prevention, relief, recovery and reconstruction processes.

2. Gender issues in Disaster Management

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, or should and should not do, can further contribute to gender differences, sometimes with devastating consequences. Yet, attention to gender is consistently one of the weakest areas of humanitarian response.

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.

3. Guiding Principles for Gender-Sensitive Planning in Disaster Management and Mitigation

In order to achieve effective results, the following concepts and approaches will have to be integrated in all phases of disaster management planning and programming:

1. A Gender Mainstreaming approach: as a fundamental tool to re-examine from a gender perspective the socioeconomic and political institutions and policies that affect development for women and men.
2. A Rights-Based Approach (RBA), as the overall guiding approach to mainstream gender perspectives in disaster management. It opens the way to upholding the full range of human rights of men and women in socioeconomic development processes.
3. A Participatory approach, in order to ensure the equal and gender-sensitive participation of women and men in risk analysis, leading to better policy-making and programme design. It is due to underline the importance of enhancing the involvement of men in addressing gender-related issues in disaster management at all levels - institutional, community and individual.
4. A Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) approach is needed in order to bring multiple stakeholders together to address gender mainstreaming through political, technical, social, developmental and humanitarian processes. It is important to underline that the focus of the interventions shifts from short-term relief and emergency response to building resilience of communities and promote long-term sustainable responses.
5. An Affirmative Action approach that aims at correcting the huge gender imbalances existing in the different phases of disaster management (for example, enhancing the participation of girls and women in emergency preparedness initiatives or early warning systems).

4. Gender-sensitive Risk Assessment

A key aspect of any disaster management and risk reduction strategy is risk assessment, a methodology that determines the nature and extent of risk. It analyzes potential hazards and evaluates vulnerabilities that could pose a potential threat to people, property, livelihoods and the environment on which they depend¹. Two elements in combination increase or decrease disaster risk: a potentially damaging event or phenomenon (hazard), and the degree of susceptibility of the elements exposed (vulnerability). The negative impact of risk therefore depends on the characteristics and intensity of the hazard, and the vulnerability and capacities of the people exposed to the hazard. Gender-based differences and inequalities have a strong negative or positive effect on the vulnerability and capacities of people exposed to hazards. Women and men experience, perceive and identify risks differently. Everyone can be equally exposed to a hazard, but women and men have different levels of vulnerability and access to resources, and have therefore developed different coping skills. Vulnerabilities and capacities of individuals and social groups affected by

disasters determine people's abilities to cope with disaster and recover from it. Women and men's differentiated needs and skills must be taken into account during vulnerability and capacity analysis, in order to develop comprehensive gender-sensitive risk assessments as well as carry out more adequate emergency management and response. Implementing accurate gender-based risk assessments is a key element for increasing the capacity and effectiveness of Rwanda's emergency management systems. A comprehensive risk-assessment system based on detailed and accurate information concerning natural hazards and gender-sensitive analysis of vulnerability and capacity of individuals and groups will therefore be paramount. This will allow the collection of significant information that adequately reflects the views of men and women for the purpose of strengthening disaster management planning in prevention, preparedness, mitigation and response.

5. Vulnerability Assessment

Gender relations shape the four factors of vulnerability: economic, social, physical, and environmental. Women are on average more vulnerable to disasters due to their increased vulnerability across all of these conditions:

1. **Physical aspects:** assessing physical vulnerability looks mainly at how location and the built environment can make disaster impact worse. Poor men are physically vulnerable to natural hazards but poor women tend to be more vulnerable due to gender-based inequalities, such as fewer opportunities, less access to resources, and more limited mobility than men in the same social class.
2. **Social and cultural aspects:** assessing social vulnerability looks at the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and society. It includes access to basic human rights, education and literacy levels, good governance, organizational systems, values, customs and ideological beliefs. Therefore, gender inequalities in these areas make many women more vulnerable to disasters, compared with men.
3. **Economical aspects:** women's access to assets (physical, financial, human, social and natural capital), largely determines how they will respond to a given hazard. The more assets people have, the less vulnerable they are; while the greater the erosion of people's assets, the greater their insecurity.
4. **Environmental aspects:** women and men use and understand natural resources differently. This results in gender-differentiated impacts when the abundance, accessibility or state of natural resources changes. These changes might limit women's access and control over natural resources (i.e. land, water, cattle, and trees and others) and reduce their abilities to provide for their families.

6. Risk Mapping

An acceptable level of risk can be defined as the level of loss a society or community considers acceptable given existing social, economic, political, cultural, technical, and

environmental conditions. Women and men need to be equally included in the determination of acceptable risks in order to reflect all of the community's voices. To be adequately gender-sensitive, risk mapping needs to: i) recognize that women and men are differently vulnerable to different hazards and that the impact of a hazard is usually gender-differentiated; ii) include the proportion of men and of women that can be potentially affected by the hazard; iii) have a variable that shows separately where women and men are at high, medium, or low risk; iv) recognize that women and men have different knowledge about their surroundings and different skills to collect data that can improve understanding and risk mapping.

7. Monitoring and Warning Services

Continuous monitoring of hazard parameters and precursors need to be ensured using local and learned knowledge as well as the abilities of women and men in the community, in order to generate accurate warnings in a timely fashion. Knowledge of the surroundings and natural resources can prove essential when monitoring hazards. Women and men have a different knowledge of their surroundings due to the fact that they use different resources and are in charge of different productive and reproductive activities. As a result of it, the involvement of both women and men in monitoring and warning mechanisms could help identify the events earlier, ultimately reducing the risks in a significant manner.

8. Communication

The lack of a gender perspective in dissemination and communication is proven to exacerbate the negative impacts that a disaster can have. Gender issues affect processing and disseminating understandable warning messages to the general population. Women and men within their social and cultural context can prefer to access information differently, which may affect the manner, medium and time of day or night it is best to disseminate early warning messages. Gender-sensitive dissemination and communication systems increase the benefits that a community obtains from these types of initiatives. Women's involvement increases the number of people informed because they are connected to different social networks and often have specific and different communication strategies that take into consideration women's practices, concerns and needs.

9. Recovery and Reconstruction

In terms of economic recovery, women's contributions in the informal sector and at household level can be critical. Efforts to move beyond humanitarian assistance and relief programs to more long-term development programs must be informed by a gender perspective to be effective in securing sustainable, people-centred development². A rights-based approach is critical in disaster relief and reconstruction

processes to ensure that women and men benefit equally. This does not mean that women and men should receive exactly the same support, but rather that the specific needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration in planning processes and allocation of resources. Programmes must be developed on the basis of a greater understanding of the gender-specific needs in emergency situations - because of differential impacts of disasters - in relation to health, education, shelter, food supplies, water and sanitation, energy and other basic supplies, as well as employment and income generating opportunities. Thus, economic recovery and reconstruction will require: i) the identification of capacities, skills, and general knowledge of persons affected by disasters and establishment of ways and means of helping them in recovery and reconstruction process; ii) the evaluation of losses and plan the sustainable assistance provision based on evaluation results; iii) the participation of both men and women on the design of transition plans from relief to recovery and rehabilitation; iv) the advocacy for population intervention in supplying of either material support or integration into income generating activities.

10. Nutrition

Emergencies are often characterized by a high prevalence of acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency diseases, which in turn lead to increased risk of death among the affected population and in particular among vulnerable groups. Women, girls, boys and men face different risks in relation to deterioration in their nutritional status in emergency contexts. These different vulnerabilities are related both to their differing nutritional requirements and to socio-cultural factors related to gender.

11. Health

In crises, the health of women, girls, boys and men is affected differently. Social, cultural and biological factors increase the risks faced by women and particularly girls. Available data suggest that there is a pattern of gender differentiation in terms of exposure to and perceptions of risk, preparedness, response and physical and psychological impact, as well as capacity to recover. Women and girls are often at increased risk of violence and may be unable to access assistance and/or to make their needs known. They are usually insufficiently included in community consultation and decision-making processes; as a result their health needs are often not met

12. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Water is essential for life and health. In emergencies, when adequate and appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene are not available, major health hazards can result. The provision of adequate and accessible water, sanitation and hygiene therefore demands immediate attention from the onset of an emergency. However, simply providing water and sanitation facilities will not by itself guarantee their optimal use or impact on

public health. Women are disproportionately affected by emergencies, in part because of existing gender inequalities. In many cultures, the responsibility for collecting water falls to women and children, especially girls. It is important to recognize this central role of women in managing water, sanitation and hygiene. Understanding gender, culture and social relations is absolutely essential in assessing, designing and implementing an appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene programme that is effective and safe and restores the dignity of the affected population. In order to provide an adequate response, it is fundamental to involve all members of the community – particularly women and girls – at all stages of emergency management programmes as they bring valuable perspectives, capabilities and contributions to the emergency response.

It can be concluded that gender play a very important role in disaster management which is neglected in India.

