Women as Equal Partners in Disaster Risk Reduction Planning and Management

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ABSTRACT

Women have long been viewed as unequal victims of any disaster. It is documented many times and many case studies show that they suffer more since majority of them especially in developing countries are economically dependent. They have less disposal of resources at hand to decide independently, are also considered as weak physically, a responsibility or a liability since majority of them are illiterate, uneducated to make any decision and also are not considered at par and are discriminated at the time of relief distribution. They are not trained and skilled enough to save themselves and evacuate others at the time of emergency. This is one aspect of impact of disaster on women which has been widely covered in various studies and reports after the disaster.

On the other hand, in recent years some studies have highlighted the role of women in rehabilitation and relief operations after the disaster as well as use of their skills in building resilient communities. It is important to give them equal responsibilities, by providing training to them in evacuation and relief operations, making them self-independent and also motivating and encouraging them to be part of decision-making committees on disaster planning and implementation. Though these studies have been done at local levels and at very small scale but they show the positive impact of making women as equal partners in disaster management. It is time that we now focus on women not as a victim but as a resource or as an asset in disaster management process.

The National Policy on Disaster Management approved by Government of India in 2009 does not even mention the role and participation of women in Disaster Management. Any policy framework for engendered risk management system would have to focus on the holistic system of disaster management. It should have equal participation of all members of society. What we have right now is lopsided policy heavily tilted towards men and ignore not only the special needs of women but also do not acknowledge the special skills and contributions that women can make to minimize the impact of disaster. The policy frameworks also do not focus on capacities of women in mitigating the hazard in recovery and rehabilitation work. The inherent qualities of women in managing meager resources, equal distribution of resources among family members, as caretakers and also their strategies to safeguard environment and efficient management of resources can help in reducing the occurrence and the impact of disaster. Women can be included in all aspects of disaster management from preparedness to recovery phase. Women should not be looked only as a victim but they should be imparted skills so that it further improves their participation in disaster management.

Keywords: DRR, leadership, inclusive development, National Policy on Disaster Management

1. Introduction

Women are viewed mostly as victims of disasters. Studies depict that they suffer more, especially in developing countries because they are economically dependent, have less disposal of resources at hand, are considered as weak and illiterate to make any decision and also are not considered at par at the time of relief distribution and they are not trained and skilled enough to save and evacuate themselves and others at the time of emergency is well documented in number of studies.

The social structure of society further enhances the vulnerabilities of women since they face discrimination/abuse/violence at home which tend to increases at the time of distress. Their contribution to society and family is mostly informal, the types of activities they are engaged in is not measured in economic terms, this further discriminate them at the time of distribution of relief
after the disaster, as their contribution to the society cannot be measured in monetary terms. Many studies done both in developed and developing countries have shown and highlighted the plight of women after the disaster. These studies focus on women as unequal victims of disaster.

This is though one aspect of impact of disasters on women. Looking at women only as victim, results in partial success of disaster management practices. Focusing on skills and knowledge of women would further strengthen the disaster management practices of any region. Increasing the participation of women in DRR by giving them and facilitating them in leadership role is important.

In recent years many studies have highlighted the role of women in rehabilitation and relief operations after the disaster as well as use of their skills in building resilient communities by giving them equal responsibilities, by training them in alternate occupations and also making them part of decision making committees on disaster planning and implementation. Though these studies have been done at local level, they show the positive impact of making women equal partners in disaster management.

It is time that we in India now focus on women not as a victim but as a resource and asset in disaster management process. Many studies have proved that if women are involved in disaster planning and management at all level it can lead to:

- sustainable development of area
- optimum utilization of resources
- reduce dependency on outside resources
- utilization of their skills
- and lastly, all of the above would help in increasing theirs as well as regions resilience and community’s resilience against the disaster.

Inclusion of women as equal partners in disaster management process not only would reduce their plight as a victim but also make them stronger to handle the risk, would keep them motivated to actively participate in all development activities and also improve their status in the society.

It is important to include women in the decision making process itself as their special skills can be utilized and further enhanced. It would make them independent and also increase their self esteem. They would then volunteer on their own in various operations during and after the disaster.

The National Policy on Disaster Management approved by government of India in 2009 does not even mention the role and participation of women in Disaster Management. (GoI-UNDP, 2012) Any policy framework for engendered risk management system would have to focus on the holistic system of disaster management. It should have equal participation of all members of society to make it inclusive. What we have right now is lopsided policy heavily tilted towards men and ignore not only the special needs of women but also do not acknowledge the special skills and contributions that women can make to minimize the impact of disaster. The policy frameworks also do not focus on capacities of women in mitigating the hazard and also in recovery and rehabilitation work. The inherent qualities of women in managing meager resources, equal distribution of resources among family members, as caretakers and also their strategies to safeguard environment and efficient management of resources can help in making the region more resilient towards disaster and reducing the occurrence and the impact of disaster. Women can be included in all aspects of disaster management from preparedness to recovery phase. Women should not be looked only as a victim but they should be imparted skills so that it further improves their participation in disaster management.

The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005 – 2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters, adopted by 168 countries in Jan 2005 at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Japan can provide guidelines to policy makers in our country for including women in reducing risks to disasters. The Hyogo framework for Action puts disaster risk reduction into the context of sustainable development planning. It reaffirms the approach of 23rd special session of General Assembly (Women 2000:Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st century) stating that a gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision making processes including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, education and training (Anderson, 2009). These two documents can provide guidelines to prepare policy framework where women are included in disaster management at all levels (administrative) in all phases of disaster management cycle in our country. Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 adopted at the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, in March 2015 in Sendai, Miyagi, Japan, also stressed on equal participation of all stakeholders. It was mentioned that participation of women is critical in effective management of disaster risk reduction. It stressed on building the capacities of women and to empower them for both pre and post disaster situations.
2. Literature Survey

There are number of studies focusing on impact of disaster on women. Majority of these studies can be grouped into two categories

Firstly, those studies which focus on women as helpless victims of a disaster. These studies focus on problems faced by women after a disaster. These studies highlight various problems being faced by women as a victim of disaster. The problems range from being dependent on others for rescue and evacuation to facing violence and sexual abuse at home and in camps to unequal share in the relief and financial help being provided. These studies not only focus on special needs of women not being addressed like their biological and physical needs but also problems of safety, security and crime as a result of increase in vulnerability of women because of disaster and unequal distribution of relief material as women face accessibility problem as they have to be at the place of shelter looking after the children and elders.

Second are those set of studies which focus on the work of NGO’s. International agencies, local community and self help groups in disaster hit areas. These studies have highlighted the involvement of women in relief work. These agencies have documented their work in the disaster hit areas involving women by providing them with improved skills, helping the women in terms of equitable distribution of relief material. These studies also highlight how women have come together to create alternative occupation, increased their household income and thus coming out of distress situation. Work by agencies like SEWA in Kutch, Gujarat after the earthquake has been appreciated not only at national level but by international agencies also.

Some of the studies also focus on failure of rescue operations due to lack of skills and training of women to save themselves and also because of other social barriers like their clothes, social/family responsibilities etc.

All of these studies are very helpful not only in understanding special needs of women but also give an insight into and throw light on special skills that women possess and which can be used for mitigating the disaster at the initial level. These studies refer to need for participation of women at every stage of disaster plans and management, to make it successful These studies prove that it is important to include women at the highest or the decision-making level in disaster planning and management. Training of women in rescue operations, developing special skills for rehabilitation and reconstruction work, motivating women to come out and participate in non-traditional aspects of disaster management are the areas where the participation of women is needed and has to be focused upon.

3. Women as a Resource in Disaster Planning and Management

The literature survey in the previous section highlights the need for making women an equal partner in disaster planning and management process at all levels from decision making to implementation for the success of the disaster management policies and programs. This would not only reduce the vulnerabilities of women, improve their risk-taking capabilities and make them strong but would also help in increasing the disaster resilience of the region as a whole and also help in reducing external dependencies (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

In this section we identify need and type of involvement of women at each stage of disaster management cycle for gender sensitive disaster management practices. We have also tried to identify some of the immediate requirements or steps to be undertaken to have a disaster planning and management policies which have equal participation of women at every stage (Ariyabandu, 2004).

3.1. First Stage: Pre-disaster – mitigation and preparedness

For implementation of any preparedness and mitigation programme it is important to have Vulnerability assessment of the region. There are number of studies and government programs which have done physical assessment of the region in terms of its vulnerability to a particular disaster but gender specific assessments are not done which assess specific problems related to women. Their social and economic vulnerabilities have to be identified and kept in mind while doing the vulnerability assessment of the area. The assessment should not only highlight the vulnerabilities of women but also take into account the special skills, occupations economic and social involvement of women in the region. This would help in designing training programs to improve the skills of women and other awareness programs implemented in the region. It would help the authorities during the time of emergency to take support of women and use their skills. Therefore detailed socio economic survey of the women should be part of vulnerability assessment of any region.

Capacity Building: The detailed assessment of women would throw light on the capabilities and capacities of women which can be further improved by imparting training. The VA would help in identifying the skills that the women lack and also the skills they are efficient in and can contribute to society at the time of emergency. There are many studies which document the pathetic state of women after the disaster when they have lost the earning member of the household. The capability building programmes would also
provide economic support to women by providing them training to take up alternative occupations to sustain the family in time of crisis.

**Gender specific data:** In order to implement any program benefitting the women there is need for gender specific data. Data on disaster impact and causalities most of the time is not gender segregated. Gender specific data would not only help in knowing the impact of disaster on women but also would help the planners and administrators in providing women specific relief. It would also provide them data regarding rehabilitation of women and specific areas where there are more requirements. The data should focus on economic activities of women, their employment pattern, working conditions, control over resources their technical skills and knowledge (Tutnejevic, 2003, Delaney and Shrader, 2000)

Any type of planning whether its general development of the region or disaster planning and management that addresses the needs of women and focuses on participation of women requires gender specific data. Information on disasters and their impacts most of the time lack gender aggregated data as a result after the disaster the relief and rehabilitation works generally do not address the specific needs of women. There are very few studies that too done at local levels which have collected gender specific data. The gender specific data can form the basis of planning for DP and M at all levels.

**Creating awareness:** In order to have participation of women in mitigation activities it is important to create awareness and generate knowledge among them about the hazard that can occur in the region. Women should also be aware of the risks that the region is prone to. It is only if they have full and correct knowledge about the hazards that the region faces that they would then participate in training and other programs implemented in the region related to mitigation of the hazard actively.

**Training and education:** It is important that women are trained and educated to understand the warnings that are issued. And they also have the knowledge as to what to do after the warning is issued. They should have full knowledge of the escape routes, the location of temporary shelters, methods of evacuation etc. Most of the time it has been observed that women being at home have the responsibility of evacuating the children and elderly, therefore they should be trained to evacuating not only themselves but others also. It is important that in case of emergency they are able to take decision independently without waiting for their husbands.

**Training for self protection:** Apart from educating the women and creating awareness about the hazards it is important that women are trained for rescue operations. Specific skills related to the problems faced by each geographic region are important. Climbing higher reaches, climbing trees, using rope bridges, swimming etc to escape and reach safer places should be part of the training. Women should also be trained for construction and making of evacuation tools like building rafts, etc which can be used during floods.

**Women trainers:** It is important to have women trainers. Women would volunteer to learn all these skills without any inhibition if the trainers are women. Therefore there is need to build a trained staff as part of DM activities who can impart training to women. Women should be part of rescue and relief teams. And these rescue teams should be posted in disaster hit areas for rescue work.

### 3.2. Second Stage: Emergency Phase: During the disaster - Relief and Evacuation

Second stage of disaster cycle, the emergency phase which is immediately after a disaster has occurred is very crucial stage. Timely evacuation, evacuating the children and elderly, provision of immediate emergency supplies, medical attention, and distribution of relief material, clearing the debris and looking for survivors all has to be done immediately. Women can play very important role and can efficiently handle the emergency situation if given the chance.

Many studies done at local level reveal how women have participated voluntarily and also under the guidance and supervision of international organizations, self help groups and NGO at the time of emergency and have efficiently handled the situation.

**Training women in evacuation:** It is important to train women in evacuation methods. Physical training and use of equipment is necessary. Teaching women how to swim, climb trees/mountains in emergency. Making rafts out of bamboo and using ropes to make bridges etc should be part of overall training. This would not help women but they would be able to save children and other family members also in case of emergency. Oxfam study of December 2004 Tsunami in Asia revealed that more women died than men because they lacked survival skills. They died while waiting for men at shores to take tem to safer places (Oxfam, 2005)

**Relief camps:** Construction and provisions of amenities at relief camp should be done with consultation of women. Women can help in designing safer and sanitized relief camps.

**Safety at temporary shelters:** Ensuring presence of female security staff and law enforcement officers in temporary shelters and camps can provide support to women victims. Here safety of female staff is also important as only then they would be willing to be posted in disaster hit areas. Participation of women in rescue work would increase if proper safety and security is provided not only
the survivors but also the staff at the duty. Fisher’s study of Sri Lankan temporary shelters after the December 2004 tsunami talks in details about sexual violence against women in the camps. (Fisher, 2009)

**Distribution of relief material:** More equitable distribution of relief material, equal access to relief monetary or in kind as provided by government and other agencies can be done if women are part of the relief teams. It has been observed since women have to spend time looking after children in camps cannot spend time standing in long queues where relief material is distributed as a result do not get enough food and other relief material.

Women survivors also feel free to discuss their needs with women members in a relief team. These members can also look into special needs of women in different age groups. The aid packages should contain all the needs of young women, lactating, pregnant and adult women. Therefore it is important to have participation of women not only in collection of relief, making relief packages but also in the distribution of relief material.

### 3.3. Third Stage: After the disaster – Reconstruction and rehabilitation

The literature survey on impact of disasters on women and their coping methods reveal lack of participation of women in this phase of disaster management cycle. This is very important stage as reconstruction activities help in rebuilding the region with disaster safe methods and provide opportunity to make the structures disaster resilient and safe. It would also give an opportunity to women to design their homes according to their needs and requirements. Therefore equal participation in women is important. Involving women in disaster recovery and reconstruction not only promotes gender equality but also faster and long-lasting recovery.

**Participation in rebuilding:** Participation of women in physical reconstruction especially the damaged houses are very important and beneficial. This would on one hand encourage use of local labor and skills and use of locally available material but also provide employment to women, increase their economic status and would give them confidence of fruitful participation in rebuilding activities. This would also let women design their houses according to their needs and requirements. The priorities of women and their requirements are different and some times cannot be perceived by men in same manner. This needs training women as masons so that they can take up construction work. In Kutch, Gujarat, women were trained as construction workers, masons and they took active part in reconstruction activities after the earthquake, similarly after Latur earthquake also women took active part in reconstruction activities (Enarson, 2001, SEEDS)

**Equal remuneration:** If women participate in construction work then they should be paid equal remuneration. There should be no bias in terms of wages. This would encourage them further (Tutnejevic, 2003)

**Providing childcare, crèche facilities at construction site:** Since women also have to look after household duties like taking care of children and elderly people, doing cooking, fetching water and fuel it is necessary to provide some basic childcare facilities at construction site so that they can freely work.

**Providing alternative livelihoods to women:** Creating alternative livelihoods for women is also important in the disaster hit areas. Women’s work most often is informal and is not counted while doing damage assessment. Time, effort and resources spent by women in doing household work, in their own farms, childcare etc is not accounted for economically as a result when new employment opportunities are created in disaster effected regions women’s employment opportunities are ignored (Delaney and Shrader, 2000).

**Damage assessment:** Damage assessment process should include loss of assets and tools owned by women. Loss of agricultural crops/land where women work informally is most of the time overlooked and not incorporated in damage assessment and recovery schemes. Women traders dealing in small and petty household daily requirements are also ignored in assessment process though the income generated by these activities helped in augmenting the household incomes before the disaster. Compensating women and insuring their tools and assets should also be included in governments schemes to increasing the risk capacities of women.

**Providing financial help:** Providing financial help to women to reestablish their livelihoods is important not only for women but the household. Increasing the economic power would also increase the household incomes. Government and NGO’s can help women in providing loans, establishing cooperatives, self help groups so that they are not pushed towards private moneylenders and fall into debt traps. Financial schemes providing loans, encouraging savings, insurance of the assets owned by women can help women in rehabilitation and recovery after the disaster.

**Social and economic rehabilitation of women:** Reestablishing social fabric of society is equally important as economic activities. Women can play a very important role in normalizing the social status. Women have natural capabilities to create social capacities among their group. Their collective power and instincts to do some thing good for society brings them together in the interest of not only their own homes but also for the communities. Government from its own side can provide funding, training for such cooperatives and self help groups which empower women and help them build their capacities. These groups in most cases already exist in the society attempt should be to organize them and train them.
4. Role of Women in Covid-19 Management

In the recent pandemic we have seen women have been in the frontline of Covid-19 management. Six countries which had women as head of the state, Germany, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Belgium and Iceland were successful in combating the spread of Covid-19 in their country. It talks of leadership qualities, strict implementation of guidelines and efficient decision-making choices made by these leaders (Singh, 2020).

Women have been working twenty-four hours as frontline health warriors all over the world providing their services as doctors, nurses and health care providers. In fact, this is the sector where women are outnumbered. In India, women at grass root levels have also come forward to manage the crisis situation as health workers in villages. Aanganwadi workers and ASHA workers have been working at village level not only creating awareness among villagers but also providing health care support in villages of India

Many NGO’s headed by women have provided services in terms of spreading knowledge and information among masses, organizing self-help groups for distribution Covid -19 kits among the migrant workers. These women have also provided services of food for not only Covid affected households but also jobless migrant workers. Women have also come forward to supplement house hold incomes by conducting online coaching classes, by distributing homemade food when some of the earners lost jobs due to lockdown. It is known that women manage stress better they are better in organizing communities during emergencies

Women managed to participate in activities of nation building whether it was election duties in West Bengal and other states and also in providing online education. They showed great adaptation to new technology so that the academic session continued without impacting future of students both at primary education and higher education levels. Work from home mostly in IT industry also forced women to not only to do office work but also balance household work simultaneously. Women working in agricultural sector continued working during this Covid time and this was one sector there was no slowdown in lockdown. All these qualities of balancing work, dedication to work, working with empathy and compassion make women an asset in DRR therefore government policies should aim at integrating women in planning process and giving them leadership role in disaster management planning. It is important that the work being done by women whether in environment conservation at local level or water management etc should be highlighted.

5. Conclusion

Women can become a valuable resource in disaster planning and management only if their potential is recognized. It is important to include women not only in every stage of DP&M but also in decision making and implementation as well. In most of the studies we have observed that women have either come out voluntarily or with the support of NGO’s or Government agencies and have participated in each and every aspect of disaster planning and management successfully.

The contribution and role of women is being recognized not only at national level but also at international level. Still the disaster management policy of our country does not mention the role of women in the whole process. It is important that women are given proper training and are made capable and their capacities improved so that they can participate equally in every stage of disaster management. This can be done by including women in preparedness and mitigation activities of the region. By educating them and making them aware about the hazard the region faces and also by giving them training to understand the warnings when issued and steps to be taken after. They should be given proper training and their skills improved further so not only they are able to save themselves but are able to rehabilitate themselves after any emergency. Women should be motivated to volunteer and take part not only in traditional activities like community cooking, childcare, medical care but also in activities like rescue operations, evacuation and construction of damaged dwellings. They should also be given financial help to start and set up their own work so that they can contribute economically also to the household and reduce the vulnerability of the family. Providing financial help in form of loans, or agricultural land, land for house construction, insurance etc. Every type of financial help should include women as equal stake holder at the time of rehabilitation.

Women should be part of disaster management committees at all levels from national, state, district to village level as advocated by PM in his Ten Point agenda for DRR (3rd Agenda). Only if they are part of decision making bodies the policies would be women sensitive and look into special needs of women and also efforts would be made to involve women in disaster planning and management. There is need for gender specific capacities to be strengthened so that women participation in DRR increases and DRR policies become more inclusive and role of women becomes more constructive. Participation of women in DRR will improve community’s resilience to disaster.
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