

Cyclones: The Days After

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Cyclones, tornadoes, floods regularly sweep Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world with a population of around 120 million people over a surface of 144,000 square kilometres only. Women represent almost half of the population. Lying in the tropical zone, with the Himalayas to the north and the Bay of Bengal to the south, Bangladesh is particularly exposed to natural disasters and their most damaging effects. When a cyclone hits, loss of life is disproportionately high among women and female children. Nevertheless, women are not just helpless victims. Through their strength and realism they play a central role in saving lives and providing relief. With some help they could become key actors in disaster mitigation and community rehabilitation.

Bangladesh, an ideal breeding ground for tropical cyclones and other natural disasters, is struggling with typical development problems: illiteracy, high population growth, poor health. More than half of the rural families have no land to cultivate. As huge rivers and their countless tributaries constantly silt up, the waters carve out shifting alluvial islands, known as *chars* in the delta. These very fertile islets are an irresistible temptation for millions of families desperate for a piece of arable soil to cultivate. On these *chars*, the landless people build their flimsy homesteads and look for self-employment. At the same time, they expose themselves to floods, cyclones and tidal waves, common visitors almost every year. In such an unfavourable context, when a natural disaster strikes, Bangladeshi women are even more vulnerable because of traditional social, economic and cultural patterns which marginalize and discriminate them.

To decide to leave one's home, one's livestock and the very few possessions

Defying vulnerability and inequality, Bangladeshi women are not just helpless victims. Having to survive in a hostile environment they have developed particular strength, determination and courage.

one has is not easy to do. If women leave their houses to seek refuge in a shelter, whatever little they possess would either be washed away or stolen in their absence. Then they would have to start from scratch again. In the aftermath of the cyclone, epidemics due to lack of pure drinking water, latrines and food may kill more people than the disaster itself. In Bangladesh, because of unequal distribution of food in many families, a woman gets twenty per cent less calories than a man. Malnourishment and poor health add to the physical weakness of women in general. Traditional discrimination against Bangladeshi women, either culturally, economically or socially, puts women at a severe disadvantage. Compared to men, women have a lower life expectancy (49 compared to 52). Their literacy rate is lower and unemployment is twice that of men.

Social seclusion is another factor of vulnerability. The practice of the *pardah* forbids them to leave their homes to go to the cyclone shelter without being accompanied by their husbands. Often, when disaster happens, men are out at work. After the 1991 cyclone, a massive effort was made by both Government and donor agencies to build as many flood shelters, on a priority basis, as necessary. Although several cyclone shelters have been constructed along with coastal belts there are not enough of these shelters and they are often located rather far away from the people's homes. When families have to run several kilometres to reach the nearest shelter, often with the sudden rise of the water level and against strong

winds, the women, children and elderly people particularly are too weak to make it. It is more difficult for women to cling to a tree to avoid being drowned. Also, traditional clothing patterns, especially in rural areas, are another adverse factor. A five metre long cloth, the traditional *sari* wrapped around their bodies prevents them from running fast or from swimming.

Finally, it is a sad but true and well-documented fact that in time of a disaster many Bangladesh men choose to abandon their wives and families, thinking about saving their own lives first. On the contrary, women will, at the peril of their own life, try to save their children first.

However, in Bangladesh like in so many countries, women are not helpless victims as so often portrayed. Since they have to survive in a hostile environment throughout their lives, they have developed particular strength, determination and courage. When they are allowed to do so, they play a major role in the planning and implementation of disaster relief and rehabilitation. Their contribution to the household income often keeps the whole family alive.

On the island of Sandwip in 1991, following Bangladesh's most disastrous cyclone ever, during the first days of the cyclone, when no relief could reach the island, women coped with the critical situation in a most practical and realistic manner. They gave their needs priority without being driven by selfish economic gain. They took care of the children, the elderly and the surviving livestock. They fetched drinking water

miles away. During the rehabilitation programme, women took the initiative to plant trees. Women who had some savings in the bank found that after the cyclone, this was all they had left. Some of them were involved in community organizations. The word spread. So more women began to deposit what they could in banks and became involved in

community organizations.

Women's marginal position in society makes them more vulnerable to natural disasters, yet they can play a key role in disaster management. It is now obvious that sustainable development and improved quality of life can only be achieved by eradicating poverty and by equitably distributing resources, power

and decision-making responsibilities between men and women. Empowerment of women and of the poorer sections of communities are key elements for handling any given emergency. ■

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