

Capacity Building for Women in Disaster Management: Lessons from Super Cyclone, Odisha

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Abstract- The most effective way to mitigate the effects of natural disasters is to be prepared for them. Women, who “are key economic actors throughout the disaster cycle of preparedness, mitigation, relief, and reconstruction”, should be provided with capacity building training to reduce the impact of disasters. In this paper I attempt to put forth some of the training that has been provided to women as part of the disaster preparedness programme in the aftermath of the Super Cyclone.

Index Terms- capacity building, disaster management, super cyclone, Odisha

I. INTRODUCTION

The most effective way to mitigate the effects of natural disasters is to be prepared for them. Numerous studies have pointed out that empowering the traditionally marginalized groups who experience greater vulnerability to disasters has the potential to mitigate their overall effects (Neumayer and Plumper, 2007). Women, who “are key economic actors throughout the disaster cycle of preparedness, mitigation, relief, and reconstruction”, should be provided with capacity building training to reduce the impact of disasters. In accordance with the provisions of the Disaster Management Act 2005, there is a need for well structured capacity building arrangement at different levels in the Government machinery and other stakeholders. Capacity building is an important attribute for the effective management of disasters. Since women constitute 50 per cent of the population and are the hardest hit in times of disaster, it is important to enable women to build their capacity through training to resist the threats caused by disasters. For the successful implementation of the disaster management plans at the state, district and block level, it is essential to impart training to women at different levels according to the needs, requirement and the different roles played by women in the various phases of disaster management, while at the same time having an intimate knowledge and understanding of the local reality.

II. CAPACITY - BUILDING TRAINING FOR WOMEN

In this paper I attempt to put forth some of the training that has been provided to women as part of the disaster preparedness programme in the aftermath of the 1999 Super Cyclone.

Proceeding on the conviction that women are more likely than men to respond to disaster warnings with protective actions

(Drabek, 1969 cited in Fothergill 1998: 17), a number of programmes have been designed keeping women at the centre of action both for preparedness and provision of relief during the event. The study reveals that women were more patient, keen to learn, be trained and were more amenable to being taught than men. Drawing from experience of the super cyclone and tapping on women’s nurturing role, by virtue of the gender-based division of labour, Action Aid and Red Cross two prominent relief agencies came up with a comprehensive programme to train women in disaster preparedness. To begin with, women are advised to keep certain items ready to meet any emergency situation. This includes storage of food such as fried rice (*mudhi* which remains edible for 15 days), puffed rice (*chuda*), parched rice, biscuits etc, which can stay for long in a jar and other essential items like candles, match sticks, kerosene, oil, medicine, needle and thread, and clothes. During the super cyclone several women could not take clothes with them and hence had to wear the same garment for several days. In some cases their sarees got caught in trees and were torn and in the absence of any replacements women had to continue to wear these torn sarees.

Women must be alert and quick to act. Once they hear the siren signaling, the advent of a cyclone they should move to higher ground, to a concrete house and not stay in their house (if they are residing in a kutch house), but to be in a place where all the villagers have gathered. They should take the provisions and all the members of the family together, especially children and elderly members of households and if someone sees old age persons on the way, they should be escorted to safer places. Emphasis was laid on the importance of saving lives over material possessions. The elders of the researched village claimed that they have seen many cyclones but never one like the super cyclone, where people had to leave their homes and had to take shelter in concrete houses. Today the endangered population of the study area are aware of the ‘do’s and don’ts in the cyclone’ and of the immediate responses to be made in the event of a similar instance.

Through different NGOs, training has been provided to the women and task forces have been formed to rescue people stuck in different situation in disasters, for instance, how to rescue people if the sea water level rises, and in every panchayat task forces have been formed with the help of OSDMA. The women in the field area have been trained to swim (for those women who are unable to swim it is necessary to keep with them tyre tubes, a big tin jar, rope and a drum. One can tie the rope to the drum as with its help one can save oneself and others because the drum would not drown in the water, as swimming as a skill is socially not encouraged for women), to climb trees, rescue people stuck in

trees, to make knots in ropes and how to tie ropes fast in such a way so that the knots can be removed quickly and rescue the people from drowning.

The people from coastal areas possess some indigenous knowledge which helps them to safeguard themselves against disasters. As most inhabitants of the coastal area are accustomed to swimming from a young age, several of them can swim as much as half a kilometer even in turbulent cyclonic currents. Many can carry bamboo, big wooden plates and a jar of 20 litres to cross the water. Women too traditionally possess these skills. Interestingly, today the skills are mostly confined to the aged groups, and not their children.

To overcome this lacuna, first-aid trainings are imparted to women with the emphasis that they pass the training on to their children. For example, if a person is suffers from diarrhea, they should first provide ORS to them and then send them to the doctor or if a victim gets drowned in water and has gulped water, how to remove water from the person body, or if a victim's leg or hand is broken, what are the things to be done before taking the victim to the hospital.

Through Red Cross, women have been trained how to save someone who is drowning in water during disasters even if they don't have a rope they can throw their saree or any clothes and they should not themselves go inside the water as they can be drowned. Women have also been trained to ride a boat and help in rescue operations by wearing specific clothes. Women have been given clothes with caps that are water resistant to wear during natural disasters to rescue the people who are drowned.

Olarah village, the focal point of this study, was severely affected by the super cyclone had no means of communication (i.e. TV), so the warning of the cyclone had been transmitted through the Radio. The endangered population did not take the warnings of the super cyclone seriously and had no idea that the wind speed would be so high and would be accompanied by water which resulted in severe losses to both lives and property. The affected population believed that if the warning would have specifically mentioned that the wind speed of the cyclone would be accompanied with water then they would have taken precautions and would have moved to higher areas before the occurrence of the super cyclone and would have also kept their possessions in safer places. The people thought that water of the super cyclone would only rise till their waists, but the water level was so high that even coconut trees were submerged in it.

The level of preparedness can play a crucial role in diminishing the impact of any disaster on a community. But for a community to be prepared for any type of disaster, it is imperative that the community realizes that they are at risk. In the pre-disaster phase and during the super cyclone the people in the researched village had no awareness of the risk they faced, but after the training provided by Red Cross, the people have become more aware and today whenever there is a warning about a disaster the threatened population start storing food items. The vulnerable population of the village is aware that before the cyclone they have to be alert and prepared. To ensure that everyone is made aware of the approaching cyclone, information is relayed through a Public Announcement System or mike by telling the *mukia* to bring together all the women along with their children. It is important to bring the endangered population together to one place to understand that the cyclone is coming and to be prepared.

Ensuring that people congregate at one location is important as it becomes easier to tell them to go to higher land and people should be ready along with their family and children to face the cyclone. When the weather forecast informs that cyclone is coming, youth should form groups and take people to higher land before the onset of the cyclone, specifically those who live in low lying areas should be informed by making mike announcement in those areas. Effort should also be made to move animals to higher ground and to see if the houses i.e. the pucca houses are strong enough to withstand the cyclone, keep medicines, food, agricultural land documents and, drinking water in a proper place. Water will be polluted after the cyclone so it is important to dig water pumps instead of wells.

Today vehicles are available in the researched village (which was not the case during the super cyclone) which can be used to take people to safer places like cyclone shelters and take older people who cannot walk in their arms to safer places. Some roads and vehicles cannot reach all places; the youth are trained to go to places where roads do not exist and take the people to safety.

The formation of the SHG facilitated (adaptive) livelihood strategies that helped to minimize the vulnerability among women. Through the SHG women are trained to earn their living through different income generating activities like growing food in their kitchen gardens and rearing of poultry, cows, goats and pigs for home consumption and the market. The money women save are kept in the SHG and loan is taken from the group. In this way the SHGs are helping to strengthen the livelihood security of women. Before the cyclone many women were members of the SHG and had formed groups of 24 members through Red Cross. But, these groups broke off after the super cyclone as the number was too high to be manageable instead small groups of 12 members was formed.

The group leaders of the SHG have been constantly encouraging the members to do different kinds of work as the women in higher lands such as Erasama, Goda and Jaba are engaged in many kinds of activities like making toys and other articles for fairs and melas, which are generally supplied by women SHGs of upper land areas. The women of the lower land areas, although they are in a group (i.e. SHG,) do their work individually and according to their convenience. It is because their husbands have migrated to cities for work, the women are living alone with their children and all the responsibility of the household and children falls on them. There are no employment opportunities in the village whereas in higher land villages, both the husband and wife are present in the house allowing women the opportunity to leave their house and to work as a group. The women of the SHG are taken to different places outside the village to understand how fish cultivation is carried out in Bhubaneswar. Unfortunately the women of the researched village could not avail the opportunity provided, with their husband away in the city, they are saddled with the household responsibility.

The women who worked as anganwadi workers were trained to educate the village women about health issues and campaign on health issues. The anganwadi women made slogans on health issues (e.g. on breast feeding, use of ORS in case of diarrhea, to drink boiled water) and campaigned it along with the village women and organized meeting and discussed it with other women. The women and men were taught to sign their names instead of using fingerprints by the anganwadi workers. In the post

cyclone period, anganwadi workers also organize programmes for disaster preparedness. The anganwadi that played an important role in the training of the women in the researched village in the post disaster is Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). Women were told to leave their kutcha houses and move to a pucca house after hearing the cyclone warning or of the low pressure created in the Bay of the Bengal from Radio and TV. Women were made aware about the importance of trees and encouraged to plant more trees (like mangrove) and not to cut them as this is one of the major cause of disasters. There are many people who are cutting the trees for profit and because of their poverty. The anganwadi workers through their awareness programme meetings educate the people not to cut trees for their survival, as it will lead to more disasters and cause damage and destruction in the long term.

Training has also been provided to unite the educated youth to persuade the people to move to higher places, for e.g. if the youths agree to save the possessions (like dry food, kerosene, clothes, important documents) of the affected people then they can be easily persuaded to move to a safer place. If such support is provided to the people then they will leave their houses and come to the cyclone shelter. A *trust worthy person* of the village should persuade the people to move to a safer place before the disaster. Close observation reveals that people in the villages trust the anganwadi worker, and their advice usually heeded by the villagers.

Several basic life-saving techniques are imparted by the anganwadi workers to the villagers, for instance how to deal with the incidence of fever, vomiting, and diarrhea etc. Women are taught simple home-remedies to save the lives of people. What precautions should be taken for infants during disasters: for example, if an infant is placed in the arms of the mother then it can get the warmth through the mother's body heat and won't be affected by cold and can survive for two hours without food. Another example is that if any person collapses in the cyclone the survivors can provide mouth-to-mouth respiration or put a cotton cloth by making a ball and placed inside the mouth of the collapsed person who can thereby be saved.

Today, even if there is rain people go to concrete houses. The respondents believed that if government could have provided them with concrete houses they would have been saved. Even after several years of the super cyclone many of the respondents are still living in thatched houses.

In Olarah village there is no cyclone shelter and only the school building which is two-storied structure created by the Paradeep Trust serves as the cyclone shelter. In this panchayat as a whole there are four to five cyclone shelters. This includes the Red Cross building which serves as a cyclone shelter in times of disaster. The government and NGOs have made some pucca houses under the IAY for individual families, after the cyclone. However concrete housing has not been found to reduce social vulnerability (Ray, 2006).

III. CONCLUSION

Community preparedness can be very useful in reducing the adverse impacts of disasters to a considerable extent. The capacity building trainings should incorporate skill upgradation in the use of the latest know-how for effective response and sustainable recovery in disaster situations. Women are pivotal to a society's

social fabric and hence it is important to understand their capacity for resilience which is critical for risk prevention and response efforts. Most of the studies on gender and disaster management report that women are not included in the formal disaster preparedness trainings (Nehnevajsa, 1989 cited in Fothergill 1998, p.16). Women should be engaged effectively in disaster management, as there is a huge disconnect between their work and equitable integration into all stages of decision-making processes, policies and programs. If women are continued to be excluded from effective engagement at such levels, gender inequities will be persistent, and countries will not recover from the impacts that disasters engender.

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Endnotes

This paper is an outcome of my fieldwork undertaken in the super cyclone affected coastal village of Olarah in Erasama Block in Jagatsinghpur district, Odisha, as part of my doctoral research in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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