



Rapporteur's Report

PANEL DISCUSSION

Addressing
the humanitarian needs
and vulnerabilities of women in a post disaster scenario

Monday, 20 July 2015

Jointly organised by
Women's Feature Service and
International Committee of the Red Cross,
Regional Delegation for India, Bhutan and the Maldives
New Delhi



ICRC



Eminent panelists discuss the needs of women in a post-disaster situation and their attendant vulnerabilities

Opening

The session began at 11.30 am with welcome remarks by Surinder Singh Oberoi, Political and Communication Advisor, ICRC New Delhi. He expressed appreciation to the speakers for accepting to participate in the 6th Tiffin Talk on 'Addressing the Humanitarian Needs and Vulnerabilities of Women in a Post Disaster Scenario'. He went further to explain that the Talks, initiated in September 2014, serve as a platform for not only experience sharing, but also for devising solutions. Oberoi lauded the participants for braving the incessant rain and ensuing traffic snarls to attend the event and he hoped that the discussion would give them an opportunity to garner more information on what vulnerabilities and specific needs women face in times of disasters and emergencies and proffer ways in which these can be met.

On disasters, he surmised that how well we are prepared for mitigating their impact remains a challenge. Informing everyone present, he said that the ICRC has a large library that is a rich resource for research, most recent of which is an enquiry conducted by the organisation on 'Women and War'. The research, he went on to explain, was based on information gathered from ten different countries in the world. Other media, like films, are also used at times to explore the position of women living in a place affected by a disaster – natural or man-made.

Moderator

Rakhee Bakshee

Director, Women's Feature Service and Senior Special Shows Host, Rajya Sabha TV

Speakers

Smt. Bandana Kumari

Deputy Speaker, Delhi Legislative Assembly

Dr Rukmini Rao

Executive Director, Gramya Resource Centre for Women

Bijayalaxmi Nanda

Academician and feminist activist

Rapporteur :

Bhanu Priya Vyas, Editorial and Outreach Coordinator, Women's Feature Service, New Delhi

The views expressed by the speakers do not in any way represent those of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Remarks by the Moderator

The moderator, Ms Rakhee Bakshee welcomed everyone present and introduced all the speakers. She highlighted how Dr Rukmini Rao, who was honoured as 'Woman of the Year', helps in empowering women at the grassroots level. In disaster situations, she added, the women should speak up for their rights and that self-belief is what Dr Rao is helping to propagate.

Following this, she introduced Bijayalaxmi Nanda, who teaches at Delhi University's Miranda House. She elaborated on how as an academician and a feminist, Ms Nanda is a collaborator in many events like these and has, time and again, stressed upon the necessity for better housing schemes for women that would give them



Dr Rukmini Rao, citing the example of the recurring flood situation in Bihar, stressed the need to generate more awareness and to develop women as leaders

ownership of their houses and help improve their social and economic security.

Speaking further, Ms Bakshee affirmed that the presence of the third speaker, Smt. Bandana Kumari was pertinent to this talk as the involvement of legislators in such endeavours as this is very important and crucial.

Presentation 1

By Dr Rukmini Rao

Executive Director, Gramya Resource Centre for Women

Dr Rao began by thanking the ICRC for inviting her to the event. In her opinion, better preparedness is the key towards achieving better results in combating a disaster. Her organisation, she maintained, helps in achieving this not for a certain group of people but for all kinds of groups and people.

There is a need, she reiterated, for communities to manage their responses towards disasters. Citing the example of floods in Bihar, she stated that even though floods are an annual event in the state, there isn't enough awareness or training among women on how to save themselves when their entire villages are flooded. Eighty percent responsibility in disaster mitigation efforts of these floods lie with the people living there and their ignorance gives way to the recurrence of this disaster, she said. Melting ice has only twenty per cent part to play. Waterlogging caused by floods in this region gives way to a whole range of health issues for the residents, Dr Rao further explained.

Women, who are at the centre of such calamities, are often reduced to mere underdogs. In rural setups, they are also engulfed with caste and untouchability issues, which pose barriers in com-

munity engagement. In the absence of any gender-centric strategies, women – a large number of whom are illiterate – are found to be overworked. Proper institutionalisation of women is a requirement, she observed. This needs to be done with the collaboration of the state governments and self help groups that work with and for people on the ground. Citing an example of Khammam district in Telangana, Dr Rao explained that her organisation trained women to cope after 12,000 people of their community migrated from Chhattisgarh and managed their livestock by constructing proper barn for them. Many a times, women are thought of as victims and are shown to be helpless, whereas that may not be the case always.

On their part, women, said Dr Rao, need to be more participative. Her organisation, thus, trains and helps them become physically strong to be able to help their families. Women and children are more at risk. In most disaster situations, the number of fatalities among women and children are much more than men. At the ground level, for example, women's participation in the gram sabhas is vital and should be encouraged. On several occasions, Dr Rao elaborated, women are pushed back even if they try and move forward. She said patriarchy was etched so deep in society that communities don't realise the importance of women excelling in the field of leadership.

She further added that in order to bring about a change at the field level, responsive action was first needed within the home organisations. Dr Rao said that a large number of women want to join the movement, but in many cases a meagre pay acts as a constraint. It is difficult for a woman to leave her child, come out to work if the pay for disaster relief work is not good, she said. Organisations, she suggested, should work towards creating a good pay-package for women, thereby having equal representation of men and women in their workforce.



The participants and panelists also discussed the need to bring in policy-level changes for an inclusive and gendered approach to disaster mitigation efforts

Recommendations

- Apart from making men and women aware of the steps needed to be taken before and after a natural or man-made disaster, men should also be made aware of women's specific needs and made more sensitive. Women, too, need to be made gender sensitive.
- Appropriate housing needs to be developed in risk-prone areas and people need to be explained the importance of the same.
- Proper sanitation in schools is very important but is often ignored. Schools serve as shelters for women and children in a post disaster scenario and proper sanitation facilities are crucial for women. This needs to be ensured in order to effectively prepare for a disaster.
- Mindsets need to be worked on. The women need to be instilled with confidence and self-belief as well as reminded of their potential.
- Women need to be made aware of their constitutional rights. They are bereft of the most basic rights and this needs to be changed.
- International organisations should tie up with local ongoing social movements for better and stronger impact.

Challenges

- A major concern after disasters is that women and adolescent girls are vulnerable and stand the risk of being sexually abused or trafficked.

- Hardly any attention is paid to the construction of houses that can withstand disasters or face lesser damage.
- Due to poor storage facilities, food grains are washed away in case of floods or end up rotting.
- Redevelopment of land in a methodical way still remains a hit and trial method in the villages that witness disasters.
- Effective and workable strategies still need to be devised for protecting livestock which most often die in situations of disaster.

Reflections

- People living on the margins are often forgotten while plans are made for the majority. A more holistic approach needs to be adopted when dealing with a diverse population.
- Subsidies worth lakhs of rupees are provided to men in the family of which women are left with only a few thousand rupees in many cases. They are forced to borrow from self-help groups and are then expected to pay back.
- Giving a plot of land to disaster victims could be a better option than giving them money.



Bijayalaxmi Nanda stressed that women could be more exposed to sexual violence in a post-disaster scenario in the absence of adequate police

Presentation 2

Bijayalaxmi Nanda

Academician and feminist activist

Taking a cue from the previous speaker, Ms. Nanda expressed her anguish over rampant trafficking of young women in Odisha and said that most disasters sadly leave women vulnerable. This is because adequate policies are not present in regions at risk, and more so, their implementation itself still remains a major hurdle. On her observations, she noted that many people look at women caught in the middle of disasters as victims, while, in fact, they are much more than that. Women, in her opinion, are main soldiers in post disaster relief work and emerge as a force of resilience. The other important context when talking about women in a post disaster scenario is inter-sectionalisation – that of caste, class, ethnicity, region, and disability. All these should be noted while making policies because these factors give rise to specific vulnerabilities.

Drawing from the works of development economist Bina Agarwal, she maintained that the causes for this are the gender inequalities present in the society much before the disaster even builds up. In her opinion, a woman's life is a 'terrain of disasters.' After a disaster ravages a region, a woman loses her income and yet others in the family depend on her to provide most of the resources. Citing the instance of women farmers in Gujarat who also worked as salt farmers, she narrated how after floods destroyed their crop, they were left penniless as the sea water from where they collected salt had also sweetened.

Many other women workers (and not just farmers) face various ordeals, she said. Like women living in an urban setup, who are working in hotels and hospitals or primary health centres, are given a lot of work as many people take refuge in, and are admitted in their workplaces. Schools, which are the worst affected in most cases, also see many teachers doubling up as volunteers besides resuming teaching after disasters.

Even though they are loaded with work, an adequate reward package is what they need. Referring to women working in Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), she pointed out how the women from Kachchh said, "Bring us work that will bring us normalcy." While men get paid for the work they do, often the work women undertake within the household are naturally not rewarded in monetary terms, which puts them and the children dependent on them at risk, especially if the husband is not well paid, or is well paid but does not provide sufficiently for them. The idea, she reiterated, is to break the patriarchal status quo and bring fresh gender sensitive strategies on the ground.

The safety of women in a post disaster scenario is also of major concern. Women could be severely at risk of many forms of sexual violence in the absence of any police protection or intervention by the disaster response team. Their situation could be compounded if they're not bailed out of this predicament by the authorities.



Smt Bandana Kumari highlighted several issues ranging from the need to have regular mock drills and ensuring proper policy implementation, to building shelters for homeless women

Recommendations

- Joint ownership of land should be encouraged so that women also get a share of the compensation offered by the government if their land is lost.
- There is a need to enhance the rights of marginalised women – be it those from the lower castes or those marginalised in terms of their sexual orientation.
- Authorities and policymakers need to recognise women as social and economic actors equally capable of ushering change.

Comments by the Moderator

Ms Bakshee noted that one of the key observations emerging from this discussion is that there are not enough women in leadership positions. She then asked the Deputy Speaker to enlighten the gathering on what policy changes were being brought in or should be brought in to improve and enhance the coping mechanisms of women facing disasters.

Presentation 3

Smt. Bandana Kumari

Deputy Speaker, Delhi Legislative Assembly

Smt. Bandana Kumari began by thanking the ICRC for inviting her to the Talk. Answering the moderator's question, she said that the most important thing is preparedness among people. Her govern-

ment, though new, is still trying to formulate policies to aid this. She maintained that it is true that women and children are worst hit by the disasters. Citing the example of relief work which she had previously been a part of as a social worker, she said that while men swim their way ashore during a flood, it is the women who are left stranded on their roofs with their children. Among these, those who are educated still find a way out but the uneducated people have nowhere to go. This needs to be changed with better preparedness and enlightenment.

She suggested that mock drills should be carried out in these places and gave examples of some mock drills that are being carried out in parts of Delhi. The government, she felt, should work with small organisations and then formulate adequate policies.

Drawing from her personal experience, she narrated how, when a major fire broke out in her neighbourhood, nobody knew how to douse it or control it from spreading to other people's properties. This, in her view, could be avoided through mock drills and by making people aware about the measures to be taken in the event of such mishaps.

Further on, she stated that one of the important things to be done is self-defence training for women as this will help them ensure their own safety in adverse circumstances.

Policies, she reiterated, are there but implementation still remains an area of concern. She gave an example of the Delhi Metro and the increasing number of travellers. She said people travelling in the metro hardly know how to manage through the crowd every day and it is difficult to imagine how they will manage in a situa-



The discussions revolved around revamping primary health centres as well as improving sanitation facilities for women

tion when a disaster strikes. Mocks drills, therefore, will go a long way for disaster preparedness, she added.

Another area of concern are those women who live on the roadsides. Many of these, she said, were homeless as a result of disasters. They end up in the cities and take refuge on the roadsides, which makes them vulnerable to abuse and diseases. Shelters need to be provided to women living on the margins, she recommended.

She pointed that often people stand as mere spectators to road accidents while the injured lie unattended. This, she said, needs to be worked on and people need to come together and help each other because that is what a community is about. She also welcomed suggestions from all the participants for the government to be able to perform better with regard to improving the situation of women caught up in disasters.

Open Discussion

Opening the discussion to all participants, Ms Bakshee narrated her own experience in reporting wars and man-made disasters. She expressed her surprise how in many situations, the relief materials sent for people struck by disaster do not help. Citing the example of the tsunami that rocked Andaman and Nicobar Islands, she remembered how the government had sent sarees for women there with the relief material while in fact women there did not wear sarees. This exposed the gaps between what people need and what they are given. While formulating policies, it is important that the government take feedback from agencies and citizens working on the ground, taking care of all the minute details about gender sensitivity, suggested Ms Bakshee.

A participant, who had also worked in Khammam district in Telangana to help rehabilitate those affected, pointed out that disasters, whether natural or man-made are almost equally devastating (as this can cause major displacement). She further commented that women should not be treated as victims but as survivors. She believed that in many situations, women don't emerge as survivors and in those situations we as aid workers should give them the power to decide which side they think they are on and then take necessary measures to help them. Posing a question to Dr Rao, she wanted to know how women living in remote areas like Kham-

mam can access primary health care needs, particularly pregnant women needing medical attention or women requiring security. She also sought to know how these people would survive after social groups phase out.

Dr Rao agreed with her that a woman should decide herself if she thinks she is a victim or otherwise. But we should look at them as leaders and should work towards making them one by identifying their true potential to lead. Secondly, she said that no disaster is sudden. Answering her question about Chhattisgarh migrants, Dr Rao explained that these people were living in jungles and could not be seen on main roads as they are likely to be arrested by police officials who in turn could brand them as Naxals. People were naturally afraid, but, she informed the audience, that civil society groups have been fighting for their ID cards so that they get work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), as that is a central scheme but that has been a challenge too. As far as maternal care is concerned, she explained that they have their own indigenous ways of home birth but having said that her organisation helped them reach nutrition centres and helped set up leaders in the community who in turn interact with local decision makers and bring awareness to them.

Another participant shared her observation from Manipur, explaining how women in post disaster scenarios are found to be a part of peace building committees but are seldom a part of the decision making or governance bodies. She then asked how this challenge can be dealt with. Dr Rao replied that whatever happens in conflict ridden situations is just a reflection of the society we are in. But having said that, the whole struggle of bringing women into politics has to continue, she added. To that, Smt. Kumari added that it is important for women from the grassroots to emerge as leaders in important positions and for that women themselves need to make efforts. They need to believe in themselves and work towards it. Women are in many cases mired in their daily chores so much that they can't emerge as leaders. Drawing from personal experience, she narrated how Smt. Meira Kumar once told her how there were no ladies' toilets in the main compound of the legislature and how Smt. Kumar got one constructed. The perception that women can't reach the top should be changed, she added.



The Q & A session addressed many concerns, especially those related to the crucial role of civil society organisations as well as the need to put in place holistic government policies

Adding to that, Ms. Bakshee said that lack of sanitation facilities is a challenge in disaster ridden places. A foreign journalist attending the Talk asked to know what progress has been made in the area of infrastructure development and in training of people in awareness building for disaster response, particularly in Bihar. Responding, Dr Rao said that there is not enough infrastructure to counter disasters in Bihar and that in the area of training, there is little progress. Efforts are being made by civil society organisations but the supportive government policies are not very holistic in nature and therefore the speed of redevelopment is not what it should be. Women, she elaborated, must take a leap of faith and shed the barriers of shame that restrict their actions to save themselves.

As the discussion grew more engrossing, a participant stressed the concern raised by Smt. Kumari about women living on the roadsides. She asked the Deputy Speaker what was being done for their security given that many areas in Delhi are still poorly lit. Smt. Kumari replied that her government is in the process of constructing women hostels for such destitute women. Fellow speakers Dr Rao and Ms Nanda suggested that women shelters that are less formalised in the structure should also be constructed thereby giving women on the fringes a safer place to rest at night. Smt. Kumari emphasised that even in places where care of these women is taken, the society at large is required to be more responsive and help them. She said the societal conscience seems to be dead as people watch women being molested and abused but seldom extend a helping hand.

Adding to this and responding on the point of poor street lighting, Ms. Nanda suggested that people, leaders and most importantly policymakers should use the research work available in public domain on safe and unsafe areas in the city. She cited the example of numerous safety audits done by women's resource group Jagori, and the safety app *Safetipin*. These, she emphasised, should be studied and policies and infrastructural changes should be based on the findings of these reports.

Talking on the safety of women, a participant vociferously questioned the options available to those living in the unregulated parts of the city. Replying to that, Smt. Kumari advised that in such

a case, citizens should approach the District Magistrate and make sure that their pleas are heard.

Lauding the spirit of the participants for asking passionate questions, Moderator Ms. Bakshee then called upon Mr. Benjamin Wahren, Deputy Head of the ICRC Regional Delegation, New Delhi, to deliver the closing remarks.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Benjamin Wahren thanked every participant for attending the event despite challenging weather conditions. He added that the ICRC, for many years, has been trying to help in addressing the needs and concerns of vulnerable people, especially women and children, people with disabilities and the elderly. He then went on to explain that they do this within two perspectives, one with practical perspective where their needs are addressed, and the other within a legal perspective that is applying International Humanitarian Law to their benefit (during armed conflict). Mr. Wahren finally thanked and expressed his gratitude saying that for an organisation that serves as an international actor in emergency situations, lively discussions like these are very important and speakers like the ones this discussion had just make it more dynamic and offered fresh insights that can contribute to solving the problems identified.

The *Humanitarian Tiffin Talk Series* is an open forum that facilitates frank and professional interaction between stakeholders with a view to generating workable ideas that can contribute to surmounting humanitarian problems.