

The urgency of equality: discrimination against women in a disaster affected area of Bangladesh

Syadani Riyad Fatema*

*Department of Bangladesh and Liberation War Studies, Noakhali Science and Technology University,
Noakhali-3814, Bangladesh.*

**Correspondence: Tel: +880-188-1500232*

E-mail: riya.syadani.fatema@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to bring into focus the problems and discriminations (such as gender biased activities in relief goods allocation, lack of privacy and sexual harassment) experienced by women in the disaster affected area in Bangladesh. The investigation also demonstrates the way out to make women prepared in advance for facing disasters and emergency situations. A mixed method approach was followed for data collection. For the quantitative part, 52 disaster affected women from Motlob Thana under the District of Chandpur (one of the most disaster affected area of Bangladesh) were selected. Purposive sampling procedure was used under the survey method. In addition, five female respondents were purposively selected for in-depth interviewing. Findings show that women are greatly discriminated, as 82% of them sacrifice food for their family members, in the disaster affected area. However, most of them do not realize that they are discriminated. The results also demonstrate that 72% of the study populations are discriminated during disaster period because of being women. For example, women have to bring the relief goods by themselves (i.e. husbands found reluctant to do this) and 53% of them face sexual harassment while living in the shelter homes and under the open sky. The study suggests that the patriarchal attitude of the husbands of the respondents and the government and Non-government agencies are liable for the discrimination in the disaster affected area.

Key words: disaster; women; gender discrimination; Bangladesh

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society where men belong to the dominant position. Since ancient age, men are positioned in the powerful locus to control the lives of women. Consequently, women are treated as the slaves by them instead of being considered as the better half. According to Marxian narrative, women become the slave of the slaves even in the postmodern era (Larrain, 2013). In the male dominated countries such as Bangladesh; women's desires, acts, even reproductive rights are entirely controlled by men. Under the circumstance, as both the private and public domain are controlled by the patriarchal ideologies women in Bangladesh find them vulnerable from home to the state level. Particularly, in the disaster situation, the conditions of women remain worst historically. Natural disasters are explained and experienced from the gender perspectives by a group of scholars because men and women are not affected by the

calamities of disaster equally (Klein and Nicholls, 1999; Alam and Rahman, 2014). More specifically, women in Bangladesh remain in vulnerable condition during disaster period because of being poor and conservative gender relations (Cannon, 2002).

Global climate changes are expected to affect coastal communities around the world, many of which are already considered vulnerable to ongoing climatic variability (Alexander, 1993; Islam, 2012). Bangladesh represents a fragile ecological niche. It is one of the most prone to natural disasters, suffered from many catastrophic floods and massive cyclones over the last three decades. Accordingly, disasters are annual events in Bangladesh. These disasters range from ravaging tornadoes to devastating floods (Nasreen, 2004). Disasters caused by natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, storms, volcanoes and droughts have serious public health consequences including storm-related mortality, injury, infectious disease,

psychosocial effects, displacement and homelessness, damage to the health-care infrastructure, disruption of public health services, transformation of ecosystems, social dislocation, loss of jobs and livelihood, economic crisis and sexual harassment (Dynes, 1970).

Bangladesh has a long history of severe impacts from climate-related hazards such as floods, droughts, tropical cyclones, storm surges and riverbank erosion. The ActionAid conducted a study titled 'violence against women during flood and post-flood situation in Bangladesh' in three districts from October to November in 2016. According to this study, women become more vulnerable to violence during the period of natural disasters such as floods and the number of incidents of violence also goes up. The study revealed that 71 percent of women faced more torture during the flood period. About 53.2 percent of women respondents complained about physical violence. Most of them blamed their husbands in this regard. Besides, a large number of women suffered sexual and psychological abuse in the relief shelters and relief queues.

Gender shapes the consequences of natural disaster where women are generally placed in more vulnerable situations compared to men (Davis, 1978). Aside from the increase in female-headed households and the fact that the majority of shelter residents are women, numerous studies have showed an increase in levels of domestic and sexual violence following disasters as per. Organizations by women at national levels are essential if recovery measures are to respond to women's needs and concerns (Turner, 1978). A narrow view of the consequences of the disaster leads to a focus on the purely physical aspect. The social realities accordingly are ignored and gender concerns are marginalized. Women will continue to be disproportionately affected by natural disasters unless disaster workers and officials acknowledge their vulnerable status (Cuny, 1983; Sultana, 2010). Finally, an absence of institutional capacity in gender

analysis is reflected in relief efforts, which do not have a gender perspective in their norms and procedures. Women's particular needs, concerns and their potential contributions are overlooked in this manner during disaster preparedness, response and reconstruction. This also serves to highlight the necessity for an organized, gendered approach to the study of natural disasters and their consequences (WDR, 2007).

Since there was no work done before on 'the urgency of equality among between women and men in the disaster affected area', this study is empirical one at this point. As a pioneer attempt, the theoretical orientations can well be the accompanying theories in making the analyses of the findings of this study in a well manner. First of all, the theory of 'gender order' is mostly fitted with the present study; where R.W. Connell explained the stages of the hegemonic masculinity (Giddens, 2006). According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is associated first and foremost with heterosexuality and marriage (Connell, 2000), however also with authority, paid work, strength and physical toughness (Connell, 2005). Connell's term *hegemonic masculinity* has become a widely used descriptor for a dominant form (or configuration) of masculinity which is seen to help perpetuate the domination of masculinity over femininity. The terms *complicit*, *subordinate* and *marginalized* masculinities describe other configurations of masculinity, which sit in relation to hegemonic masculinity in a hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 1987). In the rural Bangladesh especially in the present study area Motlab males have the attitude to establish their dominance over women. Connell believes that hegemonic masculinity placed at the top of the hierarchy, which is dominant over all other masculinities and femininities. Connell's theory can be perfectly applied to show the dominant relations between women and men in the rural Bangladesh. Giddens (2006) has summarized Connell's theory as following (Fig 1),

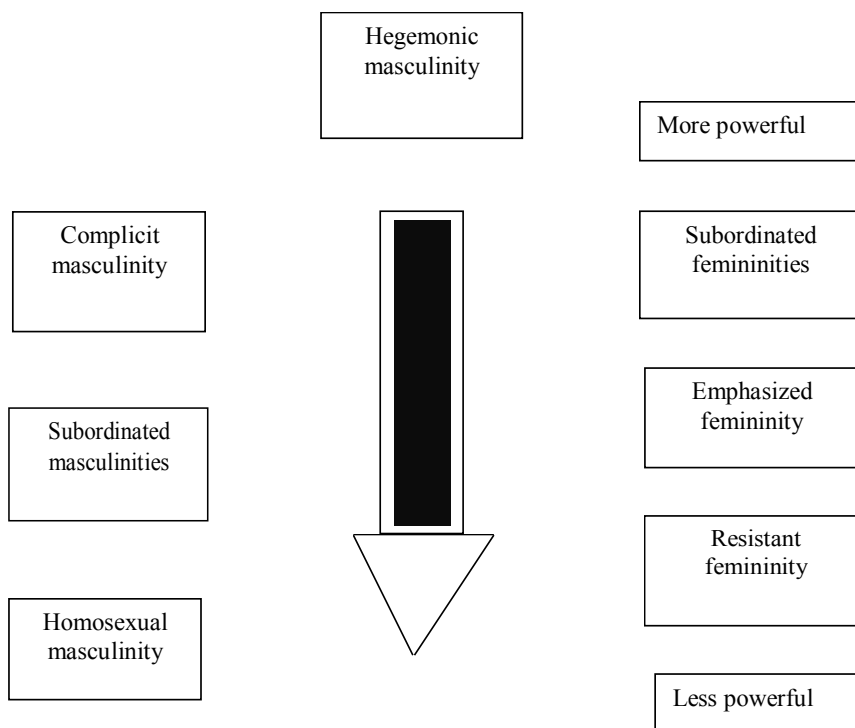


Figure 1. The gender hierarchy

The aim of the present study is to measure the level of discrimination between women and men in the disaster affected area. So, ‘gender order’ theory of Connell played the role of a guide for the present study.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The broader objective of this study is to explore and explain the sufferings, coping strategies, livelihood framework and vulnerabilities of women compared to men during and after a disaster period. It also aims to focus on- (a) exploring the problems/sufferings (i.e. physical/sexual harassment, housing problem, lack of food and sanitation facilities, and so forth) faced by women during and after the disaster; (b) explaining the nature of discrimination that the women face in everyday life during disaster; and (c) examining relief goods related discrimination between women and men.

This exploratory research utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods

including structured survey and in-depth interviews as the techniques to collect data. The use of multiple methods permitted data to improve the validity of the findings and enable greater inferences from the results.

2.1 Study population

In this study, the disaster affected women from Chor Induria, Chor Putia and Beri Badh of Forajikandi union of Motlob Thana under the District of Chandpur were the target populations.

2.2 Study area

The study was conducted in Chandpur district because this is one of the most disaster affected area among 19 disaster affected districts of Bangladesh (Minar et al., 2013). More specifically, the study was conducted among the women who live on Beri-Badh whose length is 60 km near to Amin Bazar in Matlob Thana. The study covered a village and two Chor of Forajikandi union in the Motlab Thana under the district of Chandpur. The women of these

selected areas had the experiences several disasters such as river bank erosion, flood, and cyclone, and so on. This is why these women were targeted for study.

2.3 Sample design and sample Size

Non-probability sampling approach was followed for conducting the survey (quantitative part) and in-depth interviews (qualitative part) for the study. Particularly purposive sampling procedure was adopted to draw the sample for the study. Since it is too hard to make agree the respondents to give time for academic research only 52 women were interviewed for the quantitative part. For the qualitative part, five female respondents were considered for in-depth interviewing. A checklist was used for the in-depth interview.

2.4 Data collection procedures

A structured questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument for the survey and unstructured questions were used to conduct the in-depth interviews. Thus, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data. Self-administered questionnaire technique was used to collect data. In-depth interview is considered to be a very important tool in collecting qualitative data. So, five women were interviewed mainly to deepening our understanding and to complement the quantitative data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

In the present study, total 52 respondents ranging from age 16 to above 55 years were interviewed. The table 1 reveals the demographic profiles of the respondents. Table shows that the majority of the respondents (39%) belongs to age group 26-35 years; on the contrary, a considerable number of respondents (19%) are 36-45 years old. It shows that an overwhelming majority of the study respondents (58%) are illiterate. From the table, it is clearly evident that (80%) of the total respondents are the

housewife and 14% of the respondents work in others' house. It is found that 31% of the respondents' husbands are the fisherman. Here in the table it also reveals that 53% of the respondents belong to '3000-5000 taka' income group and only 5% of the respondents belong to the 'above 7000' income group.

The study shows that majority of the respondents belong to the poor class in terms of income category. Their status of being poor is also liable for making more vulnerable during after the disaster period. In addition, the respondents cannot save money to spend in a sudden disaster period due to their identity of being housewives. Maleka Begum (age: 41) from the disaster affected area stated that,

We live in hand to mouth. Disaster brings more sufferings for us. We are affected by the flood almost every year. Moreover, river bank erosion is a continuous calamity which affects us badly. Sometimes, we sell the domestic animals to survive during the disaster period (Source: In-depth interview, 2011).

3.2 Responsibilities during the disaster period: discrimination between women and men

The researcher revealed the respondents' opinion on the level of responsibilities done by the members of the family during disaster period including respondent herself, husband and other family members. The table 2 shows that majority of the responsibilities like bringing children and older family members to safe place during disaster (57%), collecting safe drinking water (78%) and fuel (52%), arranging food (65%) and feeding the livestock (44%) are done by the wife herself.

On the other hand, considerable responsibilities towards family members are completed by the husband. Husbands are reluctant to do their duty to cope with the disaster it is taken for granted that those are the women's responsibilities.

Table 1. Socio-demographic and economic profile of the respondents

Characteristics	Number	Percent
Age		
16-25	9	17
26-35	20	39
36-45	10	19
46-55	7	13
Above 55	6	12
Monthly income the family		
3000-5000 taka	28	53
5001-7000 taka	22	42
Above 7000	2	5
Occupation of the respondents		
House wife	42	80
Works in others home	7	14
Others	3	6
Education		
Illiterate	30	58
Can only read and write	9	17
Completed primary level	13	25
Occupation of the husband		
Fisherman	16	31
Rickshaw puller	7	14
Farmer	11	21
Day labor	12	23
Boatman	6	11

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents by their responsibility during disaster

Items of responsibility	Level of response on the items (in percent)				
	Wife	Husband	Both	Other family members	Total
Bringing children and older family members to safe place during disaster	57	28	15	-	100
Collecting safe drinking water	78	22	-	-	100
Protecting the house and household materials form the thieves during disaster	76	17	7	-	100
Collecting fuel for cooking food	52	38	10	-	100
Taking the livestock from the disaster affected area to the safe places	48	30	15	7	100
Responsibility for arranging food	65	18	12	5	100
Feeding the livestock	44	30	7	19	100

(-) indicates absence of the category

However, women have to work more during the disaster period because of the gender division of labor. As men mostly remain unemployed during the disaster time, women have to perform all the works. Ratna (age: 34) explained,

My husband does not engage in the household activities because he is male. It does not look good for the men to work

within the household. Although, it could be a relieved for me if he could help me during the flood. But our society will not accept if he helps in doing household activities (Source: In-depth interview, 2011).

The above statement clarifies how to work in Bangladesh is divided according to the gender identity. The gendered division of work is one of the principal causes of making

women more vulnerable during disaster time. The use of both an “ideology of supremacy” (Connell, 2005) and violence are asserted as mechanisms to support the domination of masculinity over femininity, as well as the hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 2005; Demetriou, 2001).

3.3 Sexual harassment during the disaster period

Sexual harassment during disaster period is a common phenomenon. In fact, women become most vulnerable during disaster for different socio-economic and cultural reasons as well as patriarchal attitudes and perspectives. Here, from the table 3, we found that most of the respondents live in their relative’s house during the disaster but a considerable number of them (33%) stay in the open street under the open sky.

Table 3. Distribution of the respondents by living place during the last disaster

	Number	Percent
On the open street	17	33
In the relatives home	35	67
Total	52	100

Table 4 also reveals that an overwhelming majority of respondents (78%) reported that they could not maintain privacy at the time of staying in their relatives’ house, on the other hand only 22% of the respondents did not face any problem related to their privacy.

Table 4. Distribution of the respondents by maintaining privacy at the time staying open street and in relatives’ house being women

	Number	Percent
Yes	11	22
No	41	78
Total	52	100

Renu Begum (age: 70) was from Mohonpur village and victim of riverbank erosion. She was asked to know about privacy management during the disaster. She replied,

Without saving our own lives we could not save anything from the disaster. After erosion with other villagers, we took place on the street. It wasn’t just adolescent women who suffered for lack of privacy during the disaster. Older women and middle-aged women, like me, also felt ashamed when forced to bathe in front of male strangers. All of us take baths together. They see us but what else can we do? (Source: In-depth interview, 2011).

Noyon (age: 50) is another victim of riverbank erosion and mother of three daughters. She said,

It is very uncomfortable and risky, of being sexually harassed, for the women and young girls to pass the nights in shelter homes because men (mostly unknown) also live there. Young women were constantly teased and harassed by males and passed sleepless nights fearing molestation and attacks. I could not sleep in the night. I was worried about my three young daughters. It was dark all around during the night as the electricity supply was cut off. The young boys used to hang around with their boats and make dirty comments. I lay awake in the darkness thinking about the danger that might occur to my daughters. (Source: In-depth interview, 2011)

Again table 5 shows that more than half of the respondents (53%) reported that they were sexually harassed during staying out from their own house during the disaster time.

Table 5. Distribution of the respondents by facing sexual harassment at the time of staying out from their own house during disaster

	Number	Percent
Yes	28	53
No	19	36
Sometimes	5	11
Total	52	100

Rozina khatun a woman of 25 years old was interviewed to know about facing sexual harassment at the time of staying out from

their own house during the disaster. She shared her own experience,

One evening when I was coming back to shelter with relief at 7 p.m. a boy came up to me and said: "wait I have something to say to you!" I told him that I had to go and could not speak with him. All these other boys stood around laughing and they kept saying "catch her, keep her- -grab her." I was scared but I kept my head down and kept walking but with all the mud and water it is difficult to even walk that quickly. I was so scared! (Source: In-depth interview, 2011).

3.4 Overall discrimination between women and men during the disaster period

From the table 6, it reveals a significant number of respondents (46%) said that they themselves went to receive the relief goods. Again, the figure 2 shows that almost four-fifths of the respondents (82%) replied that they had to sacrifice their food most of the time for the other family members during the disaster. On the other hand, only 18% of the respondents replied that husbands also sacrifice their food for the children or the other family members. Though male respondents less sacrifice their food for the other family members, they do not go to collect relief goods due to their patriarchal hegemony.

Table 6. Distribution of the respondents by bringing relief

	Number	Percent
Self	24	46
Husband	18	34
Children	10	20
Total	52	100

Figure 2 reveals that overwhelming majority of the women (82%) sacrifice their food for other family members. On the other hand, only 18% husbands do this kind sacrifice. That is why, women suffer from malnutrition, gastric, ulcers, and other diseases.

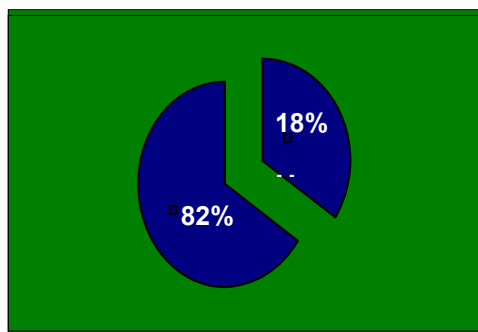


Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents by sacrificing their food for children or older members of the family.

The table 7 presents that majority of the respondents (51%) reported that the most of the risks were taken by them to protect the family during the disaster period.

Table 7. Distribution of the respondents by taking risk to protect the family during disaster

	Number	Percent
Self	26	51
Husband	23	44
Other family members	3	5
Total	52	100

It is evident from the table 8 that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (72%) reported that they got discriminated during the disaster period because of their gender identity. It makes clear that in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh the women found themselves in most vulnerable conditions and their vulnerability become more severed in disaster affected areas.

Table 8. Distribution of the respondents by facing discrimination because of being women during disaster

	Number	Percent
Yes	38	72
No	9	15
Sometimes	7	13
Total	52	100.0

4. CONCLUSION

This study has unveiled how women get discriminated in disaster affected area of Bangladesh by unveiling their adverse way of life and livelihood. Disaster is such an environmental event which often causes extensive loss and disruptions to the people living and working in hazardous environment, particularly in a country like Bangladesh. As far as livelihood is concerned, disaster makes the life of women very difficult. This research work demonstrates that as the family income is very low women have to engage themselves in the working activities for their own survival. It has been found that, women face a lot of problems in terms of sanitation, health care, nutrition even sexual problem, and so on during disaster. In this study, it is observed how women are discriminated in a disaster affected area. They have to struggle for getting relief goods for their existence during disaster. Unavailability of separate rooms in the shelter homes makes them vulnerable to be harassed sexually. In addition, excessive work pressure creates sickness during a disaster situation.

Under the circumstances, there is an urgent need to adapt a well planned strategy to protect women from any type of discrimination. Hence, an attempt has been made in this section to suggest some recommendations based on observations made during the study:

1. To deal with problems, the awareness camps should be organized periodically in vulnerable zones in order to impart proper awareness to women regarding pre and post-disaster management.
2. The entire rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts should be centered on the women related to their locality.
3. Special care should be taken to involve the disabled women in community-based disaster preparedness.
4. Women should be trained to defend themselves during disaster events.
5. Some volunteers should be identified in each village assigning specific tasks during the calamity.
6. NGOs and women self-help groups should be encouraged to create employment opportunities for the women members in the disaster affected areas.
7. Relief rehabilitation and restoration should be having right based approach rather than welfare approach.
8. At the National level strategy planning, a separate portion for the women should be included.
9. All the discrimination including food distribution, risk-taking behavior during disaster, caring family members should have to be abolished.

The study strongly recommends the attempts to identify the needs to give benefits to the women. Women have to be empowered and they need to be organized against any kind of discrimination during and after the disaster. Government and other people and organizations that provide relief goods should have to be aware of the issue that the women are to be benefited from their activities. The culture of male hegemony and domination must be discouraged. Women should have the equal chance to use the loan that they receive to conduct and protect their lives during and after the disaster.

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