

# The impact of natural disasters on women: A case study from Bangladesh

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*As the frequency and severity of natural disasters increases due to climate change, thousands of Bangladeshis are being forced to adapt their homes and livelihoods to try and minimise the damage. In a recent study, **Md. Habibur Rahman** and **Kurshed Alam** looked specifically at the impact of cyclones on women in coastal communities. They found that although women and adolescent girls are the most vulnerable in disaster situations, they also play a key role in both disaster risk reduction and rehabilitation efforts.*

Every year natural disasters cause significant damage to coastal communities, livelihoods, infrastructure and the environment in Bangladesh. 19 out of 64 districts face the Bay of Bengal making the population in these areas highly vulnerable. Tropical cyclones in particular are all too common: on average 12-13 depressions form annually, resulting in at least one or two powerful cyclones. Between [1970 and 2015](#), over 45 devastating cyclones swept across the country causing immense harm to lives, property and coastal livelihoods relating to fisheries, forestry and agriculture.

The impact of the natural disasters on women is under explored in the existing literature. The Bangladesh Institute of Social Research Trust ([BISRT](#)) therefore conducted a study in the [Patharghata upazila](#) sub-district of [Barguna district](#), with the aim of exploring women's disaster preparedness, risk and loss, adaptability and recovery capacity, and gains from the natural disasters. Data were obtained through field visits and using participatory approaches including household surveys, group discussions, expert interviews and surveys of public opinion. The study found that women and adolescent girls are the most vulnerable in natural disasters and account for more than 75% of displaced persons.

## Assessing the disaster preparedness of women

Women are often not allowed to participate fully in the public sphere, and are therefore less likely to receive critical information enabling appropriate emergency responses. The study found that even though women might receive early warning of approaching storms (from the radio, community volunteers, government agencies, NGOs or by word-of-mouth from neighbours) they remained dependent on the (male) household head to take the final decisions, for example on whether the family should retreat to safer places such as cyclone shelters.

We further found that women play a complementary rather than independent role in the case of disaster preparedness. However, they do adopt different strategies to men, such as putting aside money, making portable stoves, and maintaining a store of dry foods, molasses, biscuits and essential medicines. They make *chhika* (jute bags which are hung from the wall/ceiling) so that utensils could be stored high up, away from the floodwaters, and will sometimes bury their jewellery and valuable documents for safekeeping. Furthermore, they create "shelter belts", planting fruit and timber trees around their houses. This is part of a disaster risk reduction ([DRR](#)) approach, which aims to protect the houses from strong wind and flooding, as well as provide food and fuel after the disaster. It is also the women who cover tubewells with plastic to prevent saline water intrusion.



After a storm. Credit: [BBC World Service Bangladesh](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

### Challenges during storms

For women, running, climbing trees and swimming (even if they are able to) is socially frowned upon, and movements can be hindered by their traditional dress—the [saree](#)—, restricting their ability to get to safety in emergency situations. There are now provisions for [cyclone shelters](#) in disaster-prone areas but they lack sufficient facilities for women. For example, there are rarely separate toilet and washroom facilities (which is particularly a problem for menstruating women), and there are no private spaces for breast feeding. The lack of healthcare facilities means women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems. Furthermore, the harassment of pregnant and adolescent girls is all too common in the shelters, particularly if they get separated from family members.

### Women's vulnerability and recovery capacity

Our research found that women prioritise keeping family members together and taking care of their collective needs as far as possible, whereas men tend to protect themselves first and their assets second. Even though women take on the wider caring responsibilities, they are disadvantaged in access to relief materials because they are not viewed as the main breadwinner of the family. Support in the wake of disaster, whether from the government or NGOs, is also less forthcoming for similar reasons.

However, we found that despite these barriers the women's indigenous coping attitudes were appreciable. They participated in rehabilitation efforts, collected safe drinking water and took on paid work to bring in extra income, for example fish processing, homestead gardening, betel leaf cultivation and tree plantation. Sometimes women have to migrate to cities for better living, although success is not guaranteed.

The study observed that, although women express more mental health problems in the wake of disaster, such as stress, depression and anxiety, they are in many ways more able cope. In Patharghata women had not generally been allowed to work outside the home, but after disasters there were new opportunities outside the home. In addition to taking on paid employment to help support their families, women in the community also voluntarily worked for the Union Disaster Management Committee ([UDMC](#)) and one third of the Cyclone Preparedness Programme ([CPP](#)) volunteers are now women. Women's disaster preparedness techniques are also evolving to a considerable extent as they learn lessons from the subsequent devastating cyclones and DRR training received from the NGOs ([UNICEF](#) is even training young women to swim). Post-disaster, more than 70% of the beneficiaries receiving support from government, development organisations and NGOs are women. They receive first aid training, and assistance with rehabilitation and reconstruction activities including [WASH](#). However, it is important that women

continue to get tailored support in pre- and post-disaster situations as there is still scope for greater participation and leadership in the DRR field.

*Note: This is an abridged and revised version of a research article originally published in the [International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction](#) 8 (2014): 68-82. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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