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## Engaging Women in Community Based Disaster Management Programmes

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### **Abstract:**

*With rapid scientific and technical advancement, man's life has improved in almost every sphere, but in the field of disaster risk, this has not been of much impact, rather to some extent there is a vicious relationship between the two. It has been noticed that many a times unthoughtful steps towards development have exaggerated and triggered the natural conditions to manifest as disasters. Therefore, disaster management has become priority task for the governments. This is crucial for sustainable development. The focus of disaster management strategies has shifted from government efforts to the involvement of communities. Building of disaster - resilient societies is thought to be the most appropriate measure to mitigate the problem.*

*It is realized that community based disaster programmes are more effective because they work in harmony with the local population. But most such programmes involve male population. Bringing women into the folds of disaster management mechanism can create a deeper impact because at the basic level of society they are the ones who bear the brunt and toil for post crisis recovery.*

**Keywords:** Disaster-risk, Sustainable development, Mitigation, Post- crisis recovery.

In recent times many parts of the world have witnessed natural and man caused disasters with effective means of communication and growing awareness, the losses incurred and damage done due to these disasters is glaringly visible and comprehensible. Hence, it is felt that for sustainable development, conservation of environment and preservation of culture and human resources, deep impact disaster management measures are urgent need of the hour. India's with its wide range of topographical and climatic variations is comparatively more prone to disasters. According to the National Policy on Disaster Management in India, 2009, "58.6 percent of the land mass is prone to earthquakes of moderate to very high intensity; 12 percent of land is prone to floods and river erosion, 68 percent cultivable area is vulnerable to drought and of the 7,516 Km. long coastline, close to 5,700 km. is prone to cyclones and tsunami (Clause 1.1)." The gravity of situation and the danger looming large over India could be perceived from this data. The haunting memories of Bhuj earthquake in 2005, tsunami 2004, flash floods in Kedarnath in 2013 and floods in Jammu & Kashmir in 2014 are still fresh in Indian minds.

Realizing the regressive impact of disaster on all round growth of the country, Government of India enacted the Disaster Management Act in 2005 and declared a Disaster Management Policy in 2009 and revised it in 2011. This document lays emphasis on involvement of community as "they are the first respondents to the disaster." (Clause 10.4.1), it may be added that they are also the worst hit and prolonged sufferers. International researches and experiences also promote community based disaster management approach in place of command-control approach because community based programmes are a bottom-up approach, working in harmony from top to bottom (Pandey and Okazaki, 2005: 3). Such strategies allow use of internal resources and help to address to the area and culture specific needs of the affected population. The community based disaster management programmes planned and implemented by government and non-government agencies focus upon training and enabling community leaders, artisans, social workers and paramedics.

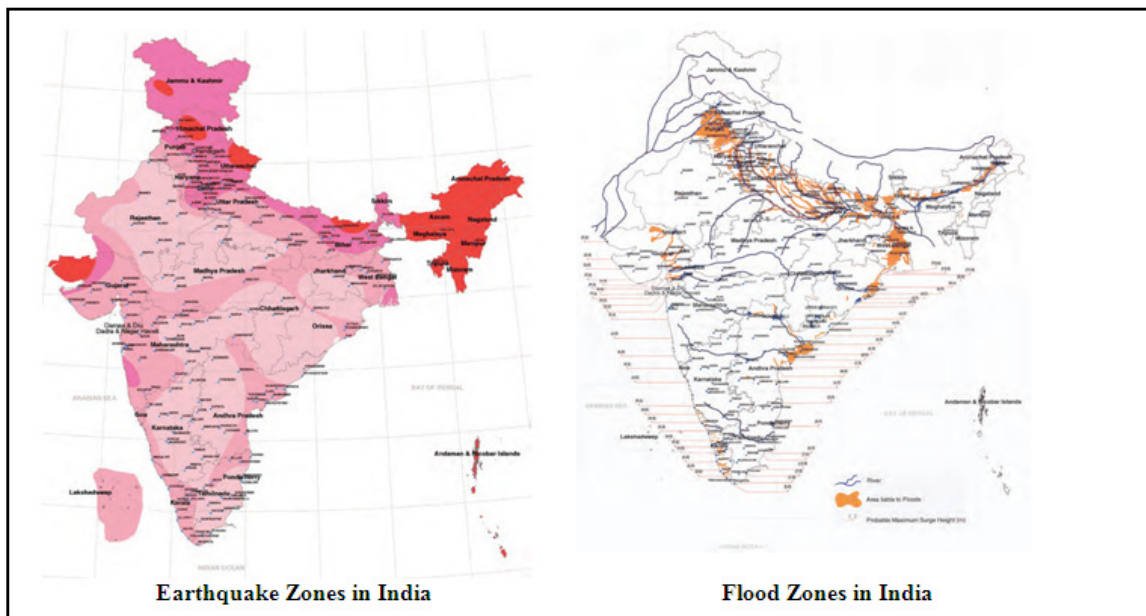


Figure 1

There has been little attempt hitherto to harness potential of women as targeted segment for disaster management. Whereas women as axis of the basic social unit, family could play a crucial role and partnership in this context.

This proposition is certainly not based on resist assumptions that women should be engaged because of their so called biologically inherent traits, like being emotional, caring and compassionate as a Freudian psychologists believe. This entirely based on the equality of sexes that rather being passive recipients of the effects of disaster, women should be the active respondents to the situation. Assigning roles to the sexes has always been a debatable issue. Greek philosopher Plato discussed this at length in context of appointment of guardian for the city of Athens, which concludes that any type of activity is not sex exclusivity, similar training could yield similar results outcome both the sexes. (Ashton-Zones and Alson, 1991: 151-157)

Recent researches by psychologist and sociologists have proved that not biological differences but deep rooted biases against women are responsible for poor representation of women in certain fields rather than their incapability to compete with males. To bridge this gap in wage market concept of 'Comparable worth' (Amolt and Mathaei, 1991: 394) is implemented. If this is applied to community based disaster management programmes, particularly in rural areas, the comparable worth of women will be probably higher than men. With greater participation of women, the building of resilient communication for successful management of calamities could become an easier task.

In rural areas women remain excluded from such exercises due to many reasons such as lack of education, language barriers, their domestic responsibilities etc. These so called impediments, if treated positively, could lend great support to community based programmes. Their efficiency in domestic affairs, knowledge of local languages, familiarity with geo-physical conditions and their sensitiveness could widen the scope and intensity of impact of policies in this field.

Generally, disaster management programmes constitute of four parts:

1. Prevention
2. Preparedness
3. Mitigation
4. Relief

Initially all government plans emphasized upon relief and reconstruction but since 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan underlined that sustainable development is possible only by incorporating prevention and mitigation in development policies, these parts have become more important for vulnerability reduction. Prevention and mitigation depends largely on community participation and partnership. Community empowerment in general and women empowerment in particular could play a decisive role in implementing of preemptive measures, in coping with the crisis and in post crisis recovery.

The first steps of the policy depend on successful 'knowledge management' for prevention of disasters. The government policy has marked community service centres as nodal offices for realizing the goal of knowledge driven society (Clause 8.3.2(iv)). Women should be specifically targeted to be trained in understanding of environment, its protection and preservation of resources. In rural and hill areas women tend for fuel wood. If they are introduced to the use of alternative fuels and are invited to contribute in development of innovative techniques or revival of traditional ways, their cooperation would make a decisive difference. Sri Sundarlal Bahuguna's 'Chipko Andolan' is a magnificent example of such initiative. The force of women behind this movement made it a great success in anti-deforestation campaign. Safe disposal of non-biodegradable waste is another issue that could be handled by women in a better way.

Preparedness is second step of disaster management programmes. In disaster vulnerability areas this assumes greater importance. This aims at 'saving and sustaining life' till relief comes. Social systems invest for women with the duty of feeding and caring for the family. Traditionally women tend to store fuel wood and food grains as part of their preparedness regime. This could not work in case of floods and rains as the wet wood could not burn and food could not be prepared, even the relief material could become of no help. If women are made aware of the items that could be useful in the times of calamities such as kerosene oil, candles, ready to eat food, powdered milk of medicines, disaster management would become easier.

Mitigation of the calamity is the most critical part of disaster management plan and demands of highest courage, patients and intelligence. At this stage 'risk knowledge' plays a decisive role in damage control and in minimizing the loss. The persuasive communication continuum model developed by the University Corporation of Atmospheric Research, USA, explains it this way:

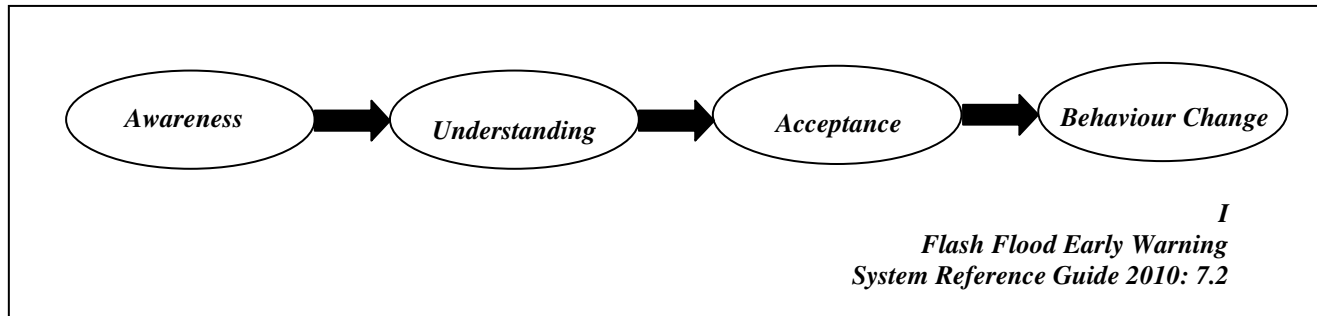


Figure 2

It has been experienced that women are most resistant group to heed to the warnings and evacuation orders as they are too attached to their homes, livestock and other belongings. This happens due to their lack of knowledge of warning systems, their ignorance and in turn their understanding and acceptance of it. Women should first of all be made aware of the technical aspects of warning systems and their messages. If they understand the risk that exists and the magnitude of its impact and accept both the facts their behaviour would change instinctively. Thence women folk could turn into an asset rather than a liability in mitigation of disaster.

In the time of crisis, children and old people are most vulnerable because they are not independent and are overwhelmed by the trauma and distress. In such situation immediate action is key factor in restricting casualties. Women trained in evacuation practices, first aid methods and life saving techniques could rise up to the occasion. The availability of women with the family, their proximity and trust entrusted in them by the family makes them most suited agency for the immediate action and emergency response.

It is observed that disaster management programmes are faced with the problem of sustainability. Once the government agencies or non-government organization complete their work, the onus for continuation and preservation of efforts lies with the community. This is possible when community is prepared to own these measures and establishments. It could be achieved by incorporating them in local culture and traditions. Use of folk songs, stage plays and opportunities such as social and religious gatherings could be used to disseminate knowledge and information. This largely comes in the domain of women. Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, Nagoya, Japan has conducted a case study in Cambodian's flood hit areas, it shares that, "Public awareness is best approached with creativity and innovation, the most effective ideas and methods came from among other, the organization with mandate from women's affairs." (Flash Flood Early Warning, 2010: 7.1)

Reconstruction and livelihood recovery are important components of disaster management plans. Agriculture, industries and mean of communication become dysfunctional during the crisis and take time to be reconstructed. For the interim period dependence of relief is not sufficient for proper living. In this situation traditional crafts, small cottage ventures could be considered as alternative modes of livelihood. Women could be significant contributors in this. After Gujarat earthquake in 2001, 'Patanaka New Life Plan' was introduced with the help of national and international agencies for reconstruction. This has been declared a successful programme (Pandey and Okazaki, 2005: 3) in terms of community involved and ownership. Women from Gujarat played a laudable role in its success by giving their input in form of traditional ways and techniques.

Finally, the post crisis trauma reduction and behavioural rehabilitation is not possible without proactive role of women.

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