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## **Assam Drowns Every Year: Challenges of Women during Floods and Building Adaptive Capacity**

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### **Abstract**

*The North-eastern region of India specifically Assam is prone to natural disasters like earthquake, floods, landslides, cyclone and occasional drought since time immemorial. People in Assam are subjected to perennial floods, river-bank erosions, landslides and occasional earthquakes. In disaster situations like floods, women and men, boys and girls are affected differently and there is a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process: exposure to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical impact, psychological impact, recovery and reconstruction. And the situation is no different in the State of Assam. Women in Assam bear the brunt of floods year after year. Due to social norms and their interaction with biological factors, women particularly girls- face increased risk to adverse health effects and violence. They are unable to access assistance safely and/or to make their needs known. Additionally, women are insufficiently included in community consultation and decision-making processes, resulting in their needs not being met. Hence, this paper initiates to throw light on the challenges women face during floods in Assam and also highlights certain urgent measures to combat such challenges faced by women during floods. Proper policy, planning and good governance can definitely reduce any sort of hazard and can increase the socio-economic situation through different micro credit schemes in collaboration of government, non-government and international agencies.*

## **Introduction**

Human beings have been at the mercy of natural disasters since time immemorial. Floods, fires, earthquakes and tremors, mudslides, volcanic eruptions, tsunami, tropical storms, landslides, droughts and famine consistently remind us of how vulnerable we are and at nature's mercy. And when any such kind of natural disaster strikes, it brings sudden disruption to the normal life along with enormous damage to property associated with high casualty of human life. Natural disasters affect everyone but they do not affect everyone equally. Even in developed countries such as the US, with relatively robust infrastructure and social systems, an extreme climate event can affect certain members of the community unequally. Asia is the continent where largest number of people has been displaced due to natural disaster. According to an Asian Development Bank Report titled 'Climate change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific', China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Maldives face the greatest risk while Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, China and South Korea are also especially vulnerable. In India North-eastern region specifically Assam is prone to natural disasters like earthquake, floods, landslides, cyclone and occasional drought. People in Assam are subjected to perennial floods, river-bank erosions, landslides and occasional earthquakes. While flood is a perennial disaster and aggravated by human interference, the earthquake is a natural disaster that occurs occasionally.

Occurrence of flood and erosion is the burning problem of Assam. Not only the two main rivers Brahmaputra and the Barak but also their small and medium sized tributaries cause havoc in Assam in the shape of floods, bank erosion and drainage congestion. Nowhere in India, is problem of flood more acute than in the flood plains of Assam. Brahmaputra, the lifeline of Assam, is an antecedent river, older than the Himalayas and the devastation it creates in the form of increased flood, riverbank erosion and landslide has increased substantially over the years in terms of area and victims. It would be pertinent to point out that the plight of the victims of erosion is much more severe than the victims of flood. The victims of flood at least can go back to their original land once the flood water recedes. But the riverbank erosion-induced displaced population cannot go back to their land as their land becomes part of the Brahmaputra River.

Studies carried out across the globe have revealed that in disaster situations, women and men, boys and girls are affected differently and there is a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process: exposure to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical impact, psychological impact, recovery and reconstruction. And the situation is no different in the State of Assam. Women in Assam bear the brunt of floods year after year.

## **Issues or Challenges Faced by Women in Assam during Floods**

- Floods have immediate and long term impact on women and girls in both rural and urban contexts but more in the rural context. Women bear the responsibilities of running households, childcare and rebuilding homes after floods, etc. Mobility of women gets restricted with the imposition of relief camps and their work gets limited

to unpaid care giving work which does not have any cash benefit. This in turn forces women to leave the home and earn an income which resulted in girls dropping out of school to look after younger siblings and do the chores.

- Women suffer more during floods, which may confine them to their households on raised platforms with a heavy load of responsibility and work to manage drinking water, cooking, and tending their children and livestock. Traditional gender specific work such as carrying water, cooking, caring for children and animals naturally become too difficult for them during flood. They encounter problem in cooking the food as there is lack of firewood and dry material to set fire in the oven. For lack of resources poor women face more problems than women belonging to middle class and rich households.
- When women are in a boat to transport them somewhere, they must hold back nature's call due to the lack of toilet and bathroom facilities, and put their sanitation and hygiene on hold leading to various other adverse physical issues and health disorders. There is also lack of clean water and soap for hand washing and personal hygiene. The submersion of latrines during the floods force flood victims to use open space and unsafe latrines that are located at a distance from their houses and are usually unwelcomed when using others' latrines. Women also face menstrual management crisis and find it difficult to manage menstruation at the shelter centres.
- Women and girls become very insecure in the flood shelter or at home. There is no state mechanism as such to provide security in the flood shelter. Women and girls are not safe from neighbours or close relatives. Sometimes, it is not acceptable for a girl of marriageable age to seek shelter in somebody's house. Many women do not go to flood shelters due to the lack of security, abuse in relief shelters and relief queues.
- During the flood or disaster poor widow women and elderly people confine to their houses for many days and have to drink floodwater. Because they have neither the physical strength to reach tube wells, nor the economic means to hire a boat to collect clean water. Poor women with only one sari or mekhela sador (the traditional state costume of Assam) are often obliged to remain in wet clothes for most of the day for the lack of private space to dry off.
- For vulnerable women in Assam dangers include sexual violence and sexually transmitted infections. And in the chaos and displacement that is the aftermath of a natural disaster like floods, child abuse and neglect, violence against a partner, and exploitation and trafficking are likely to increase. The impact of trafficking has been harder on girls. Around half of the girls trafficked from Assam are estimated to end up in brothels in the metros. In fact, Guwahati may be considered the kidnapping capital of India. It is also the capital of an international flesh trade racket. Specific risks encountered by women and girls during floods include increased incidences of human trafficking, violence against women and sexual abuse, which in turn can lead to unwanted pregnancies, sexual diseases and other reproductive health issues, and psychological trauma.
- Instances also prevail where displacement of women due to floods have resulted in women trafficking which is a social evil. Some anti social elements try to lure away young women outside the state with promises of good job. In fact, young girls from Assam are put on sale in the brothels of other parts of the country for a few thousand rupees. Floods also lead large scale migration of the people to metropolises. Young

women are often kidnapped under the guise of providing them employment and then made to work in massage parlours and salons in the metro cities of India. Most of them accept their fate as they get paid and have to support their families back home.

- In moments of unbearable financial or social distress, flood-affected families have increasingly resorted to marrying their daughters off — the sooner the better — in a bid to protect them from more instability and hunger. With the social pressure on the patriarch to be responsible for the safety of women in his household and the notion that the family's honour is linked with female chastity, the odds are stacked against daughters.
- To top it up and add to their never ending woes during floods, for the women who are rescued, some of them are asked for sexual favours by their male rescuer and consequently, due to a sense of obligation, the women succumb to their demands.

### **Recommendations for Mitigating And Reducing Sufferings of Women During Floods in Assam**

We see from the above mentioned challenges that due to social norms and their interaction with biological factors, women particularly girls- face increased risk to adverse health effects and violence. They may be unable to access assistance safely and/or to make their needs known. Additionally, women are insufficiently included in community consultation and decision-making processes, resulting in their needs not being met. This requires urgent measures to combat such challenges faced by women during floods. It is noticed that proper policy, planning and good governance can also reduce any sort of hazard and can increase the socio-economic situation through different micro credit schemes in collaboration of government, non-government and international agencies. In this regard, following recommendations can be made for mitigating and reducing sufferings of women suffering from floods in Assam.

- Women should be given priorities in all policies, planning and programs related to disaster management. It needs to be ensured that flood victims especially women have fair and easy access to information on relief and recovery services and assistance which may be available. Sanitary supplies along with other supplies related to women's reproductive health must be provided.
- The menace of women trafficking cannot be controlled unless the NGO's working in this field and the Government agencies work sincerely towards social and economical development of the downtrodden. Police on the other hand should be vigilant at the ground level and keep a track of the present status of the problem in Assam. The major impediment towards containing the problem of human trafficking is improper enforcement of laws along with the inadequate and ineffective policies and organisational structures. Even good legislations become ineffective and meaningless if not implemented in a strict manner.
- Community-based awareness raising programs should be strengthened. Seminar, symposium and workshop will have to be arranged in flood prone areas in Assam like

Dhemaji, Majuli, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Kokrajhar, etc and ensure the participation of women in these programs. Disaster mitigation strategies and disaster preparedness techniques should be included in school, college and university level curriculum. Besides, short course, diploma and training programs have to be introduced both in urban and rural areas.

- Shelters should be well constructed with multipurpose use and there should be separated facilities for women. Makeshift relief camps are often over-crowded without private spaces for women to take bath, to breastfeed etc. Shelters should be constructed at a place where access of women will be direct and easy during the disaster. Transport networks should be developed to expedite movement and rescue people and other things during disaster. Facilities should be made to preserve sufficient amount of drinking water during and after disaster.
- It is observed that most of the women who have lost their clothes in the floods are not only unable to go out in public which affects their access to assistance and information but also become more reliant on others increasing the potential to get abused. This discourages the women to freely participate in clean-up, recovery and rebuilding efforts. Women in Assam especially rural women prefer to wear mekhela sador and even if help in terms of clothes pours in from NGOs and the common public, women hesitate to wear anything other than their traditional costume. As such there is a need for culturally appropriate clothing for women and girls.
- Women can be educated on health issues and should be involved in the revitalization of flood affected areas. They need to be trained on how to preserve and process fruits, vegetables and livestock. Proper training on how to utilize their household income and savings for flood preparedness plans, improved cooking stoves, safe drinking water, emergency food storage, and flood preparedness calendar to women is very much essential to adapt to the crisis. According to Assam Integrated Flood and Riverbank Erosion Risk Management Investment Program (RRP IND 38412), women shall represent 30% in all community-based decision making processes for community-driven small work implementation. Also 30% of women's representation in training programs on flood and river erosion risk management is a good move towards this direction.
- Laws should be implemented with legal support to prevent violence against women. A market system can be developed in the local area so that the flood-affected people are able to receive a fair price for the cattle, poultry, and other goods they sell, as well as to insure that essentials can be purchased by women at affordable prices. To reduce the vulnerability among women, the government, working together with NGOs, can introduce local and home-based industries such as food processing mills, cottage industry, and thread mills. Flood resistant crops and the distribution of these seeds in flood prone areas can be introduced with special emphasis on women's home-based crop cultivation.

- Government Organizations as well as Non Government Organizations should take infrastructure development and income generating activities for women in the flood affected areas. Organizations like *VOICE, INCRISISRELIEF, SPADE, HABITAT FOR HUMANITY*, etc have been extending their help to flood victims through emergency shelter kits, hygiene kits and community tools. However, much needs to be done in this area. We must recognize that poor women are affected worst by disasters and it must be ensured that their needs are prioritized. It should be ensured that women have equal access to developmental activities.

### **Conclusion**

In reality, while women's vulnerability to disasters and floods is often highlighted, their actual and potential roles in disaster risk reduction have often been overlooked. Very few existing disaster risk reduction policies and projects recognized the skills and capacities of women which could significantly contribute to disaster risk reduction policies and building resilience. So, situation demands the involvement and participation of women as policy and decision maker, sharing experiences, in some cases key role players for preventing or management of flood/disasters.

Indian media have often been accused of being metro-centric in its reporting, especially by those living in the north eastern part of India. While front pages and city pages give a fair amount of coverage to the floods in Chennai or Mumbai, Assam which reels under devastating floods every year gets the least media coverage be it in the newspapers or television. Ironically and to our utter dismay, no national news channel shows such horrors of Assam 24\*7. As far as Assam is concerned, flood management and resilience will only be possible through proper education and the participation of local communities and institutions.

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