

## **WOMEN'S VULNERABILITIES IN A FLOOD AFFECTED AREA OF BANGLADESH**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to focus on the different types of vulnerabilities of women resulting from a specific flood affected area of Bangladesh. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for collecting relevant data. A total number of 114 women from Motlob Thana (one of the most flood prone area in Bangladesh) under the district of Chandpur was purposively selected for face to face interview using a structured questionnaire. For the qualitative part of this study, five female respondents were also considered for in-depth interviewing. The study revealed that women are mostly vulnerable due to the excessive work pressures during flood and they feel insecure in the shelter homes. It also shows that women suffer from several water borne diseases which are sometimes considered as life threatening.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Women, Flood, Vulnerability, Disease.

### **1. Introduction**

Flood is the most common natural hazard among other disasters in Bangladesh. It is caused by over rainfall during monsoon, natural drainage system, water flow from Himalayans through the rivers Meghna, Padma and Brahmaputra, and so on (Shamsuddoha and Chowdhury, 2007; Shaw, 2006). In addition, opening the Teesta barrage during heavy rainfall from Indian side is also liable for causing flood in Bangladesh. Therefore, this country faces the calamities done by flood almost every year (Shimi, et al., 2010). Due to flood, women are particularly vulnerable to several kinds of diseases, sexual harassment, poverty, excessive work pressures, and so forth (Thompson and Sultana, 1996; Shaw, 1989; Sultana, 2010; Azad et al., 2013). Research showed that women are more vulnerable than men during the flood situations of Bangladesh (Azad, et al., 2013). Sultana (2010) more specifically mentioned that women have to fight more than men to survive in a flooded area due to the patriarchal social structure of Bangladesh (Sultana, 2010). In addition, Shaw (1989) argued that women do not get enough food items from the relief camps but men can manage to get these very easily (Shaw, 1989). About the impact of flood, Shimi et al. (2010) emphasized on the water borne diseases which sometimes take lives of people of the affected areas (Shimi et al., 2010).

However, women's lives are in more risk due to the water borne diseases. For example, Neumayer and Plumper (2007) studied on 'the gendered nature of natural disasters' and revealed that natural disasters (i.e. flood) lower the life expectancy of women more than men (Neumayer and Plumper, 2007). Lastly, Dewan (2015) showed that women and children live in a great risk of being abused and getting diseased during flood because they have to live in the temporary shelter and even by the road side (Dewan, 2015). The above research showed different types of vulnerabilities that women face during flood in Bangladesh. However, it is necessary to study more for exploring the underlying causes of women's vulnerabilities in the flood affected areas of Bangladesh. This is why, this study aims to understand women's vulnerabilities of a particular flood affected area of this country.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting relevant data. For the quantitative part of this research, a total number of 114 flood affected women from Chor Induria, Chor Putia and Beri Badh of Forajikandi union of Motlob Thana (one of the most flood prone area in Bangladesh) under the District of Chandpur were the purposively selected for face to face interview. Chandpur district was selected as the study field for this research because this district is one of the most nineteen natural disaster prone districts in Bangladesh (Minar, 2013). A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection tool for the quantitative part of this research. In addition, this study also included five female respondents for in-depth interviewing as the part of qualitative part. A check-list was used for in-depth interviewing.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

**3.1 Respondents' Demographic Characteristics:** Total 114 women aged from 18 to above 57 years were interviewed. The table 1 reveals the socio-demographic profiles of the respondents. It shows that the majority of the respondents (33%) belongs to age group 28-37. About the household income, it was found that majority of the respondents' (67%) household income was BDT 5000-7000, which can be considered as very minimal in the context of today's Bangladesh economic condition. The study also signifies that overwhelming majority of the study respondents (49%) are illiterate. The household income varies during flood because respondents' husbands become unemployed at that time. Since crops fields are covered by flood, both men and women who work in the field of big farmers remain idle.

My husband work as a day labor in the agriculture filed of other rich farmers. But he is not hired during flood season because crop fields are affected by flood. Due to the lack of daily

income, we have to depend on relief foods and sometimes we take loan with high interest rate from the rich people of our village to survive during flood (Rahima, age: 43).

Women like Rahima in the flood affected area live below the poverty line because of unemployment. Briefly, flood makes them poorer than before. It is very common practice to sell the household assets to survive in the flood affected areas in Bangladesh.

**Table 1:** Socio-demographic and economic profile of the respondents

Characteristics	(N)	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
18-27	13	12
28-37	38	33
38-47	29	25
48-57	15	13
Above 57	19	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Monthly income the family</b>		
BDT 5000-7000	76	67
BDT 8000-1000	22	19
Above BDT 10000	16	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education</b>		
Illiterate	56	49
Can only read and write	26	23
Completed primary level	18	16
Completed high school level	14	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>

**3.2 Causes of Women's Vulnerabilities:** The table 2 shows the causes of why women become more vulnerable compared to men in the flood affected area. The researcher found that 63% of women in the flood affected area cannot afford three meals in a day. Being women, they have to sacrifice their food for the husbands, children and for the parent in laws. Consequently, women suffer from malnutrition which causes severe diseases.

I eat at the last moment if there is enough food stored in the house. Because it is the tradition in our society that elder family member, parent in laws, husband and children will take the

food first. Maximum time, I go to sleep without taking any food especially during flood. I suffer from gastric pain very often due to irregular food taking habit (Julekha Banu, age: 36).

In addition, women work more during flood. They collect cooking materials from nature, drinking water from long distance, take care of domestic animals, and feed the children and other family members, and so on. These work pressures make them over stressed. The current study found that 79% of the respondents had the experiences of excessive work pressure.

During flood, my husband usually passes time with friends by playing cards or by gossiping in the tea stall. Consequently, I have to arrange everything. More even, he does not go to collect food, rice and wheat from the relief camps because standing in the line for collecting these food items does not go with the masculine character. Sometimes, I feel sick due to excessive work pressures but I do not have any option to take rest (Minari Begum, age: 29)

Along with this work pressure, women in the flood affected area are vulnerable to security and safety related issues. The study shows that 83% of the respondents feel insecure while living in the temporary shelter home during flood.

I have a daughter of 16 years old. As there was no separate living room as well as toilet for the women in the shelter home, I could not sleep at night due to feeling of insecurity about my daughter. Because sometimes girls are being raped or sexually harassed by other men or young boys in the shelter home (Forida Akter, age: 47).

The last item of women's vulnerabilities that this research focused is related to diseases resulting from flood. Getting diseased is a very common effect of flood. The percentage may vary time to time or place to place. The table 2 reveals that maximum of the respondents (74%) suffered from diseases during the last flood period.

Almost all of my family members suffered from water borne diseases such as diarrhea, fever, jaundice etc. The scarcity of pure drinking water during flood is the main reason of these diseases. Since we do not have cash money, it becomes impossible to go for treatment. Children of our neighbor family died due to severe diarrhea during last flood (Morjina, age: 34).

**Table 2:** Items of women's vulnerabilities in the flood affected area.

<b>Affordability of three meals per day during flood</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	26	23
No	72	63
Sometimes	16	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Experience of more work during flood period</b>		
Yes	90	79
No	15	13

Sometimes	9	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Feeling of insecurity while living in the shelter homes during flood</b>		
Yes	94	83
No	7	6
Sometimes	13	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Experience of diseases during last flood</b>		
Yes	85	74
No	19	17
Sometimes	10	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4. Conclusion

Bangladesh is a developing country where women face various kinds of problems due to the existence of patriarchal social relations. Natural disaster such as flood adds some new kinds of vulnerabilities. Women's vulnerabilities during flood mainly result from the excessive work pressures for managing household activities, collecting drinking water from long distance, maintaining children and domestic animals, and experiencing of sexual harassments in the shelter home. In addition, flood worsens the poverty level among the affected inhabitants. Moreover, unavailability of food, medicine and living places make women more vulnerable. Preplanned actions should be initiated by the relevant agencies of the government to lessen women's vulnerabilities in the flood affected areas of Bangladesh. More academic research on large section of people from different flood affected areas of this country might give holistic approach to come with the solutions of women's vulnerabilities. Women's mental health related problems resulting from excessive work pressure and feelings of insecurity during flood can be explored in the future research.

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