

# Rights Based Approach in Disaster Relief Efforts: A Glide from Disadvantage and Inequality to Empowerment and Gender Equality

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*Abstract* : Woman, more specifically Indian economically disadvantaged woman, has always been a figure in the background – managing chores, bringing up children and her decision negligibly considered in public, social and economic decision making. She has no equal opportunity of access to ‘primary goods’ as health, nutrition and education. Ironically, women form a major portion of the vulnerability group at the time of a crisis situation during a disaster, are the first responders to the disaster and are the most affected and exploited during post disaster care. Gender inequality which keeps the woman at a disadvantage throughout her life not only stifles her development prospects – it also staggers her decision taking abilities which might prove detrimental to the health and lives of everyone in her care at the time of a disaster. There is hence, a dire necessity to foster gender equality in the society, inculcate gender sensitivity and look at a socially inclusive approach in disaster management. This is truer especially in a country like India, more specifically among the rural populace, where she works under the impact of a gender disparity right from her childhood. Considering, the relevance of the issue with Assam falling in Zone V and under the threat of a long overdue earthquake of maximum intensity, there is a need to look at a gender approach in disaster management. This paper aims at attaining gender equality through preparing for empowering of women at the times of disaster – by adopting a rights-based approach in disaster relief efforts and sorting out a plan of gender sensitive in disaster management.

*IndexTerms* - Gender inequality, gender sensitivity, rights-based approach, gender sensitive disaster management.

## I. Introduction: Women in India, her position in society and Gender Discrimination

From time immemorial, Indian women in general and rural Indian women in particular has been relegated to a position lower than to her male counterpart in all matters whether be in matters of social, economic and or political decision making. Ironically, while the women figure of the ‘Devi’ is worshipped and venerated; the real-life woman is seen to best fit in to the domain of the household, as a backbone that nourishes the family to advance in life. Hence, when questions of empowering a woman comes, it actually refers to inspiring woman “with the courage to break free from the chains of limiting beliefs, patterns and social or religious conditions that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to realise their true beauty and power” (Deka 197). Years of discriminatory and gender inequality in behaviour even in matters to minimal requirements as health, nutrition and education normally develops in her a personality who shies away from being in the limelight because of a very low level of self-esteem. Given this figure in the making of the characteristic Indian rural woman, she emerges as someone who is dependent on her male counterpart whether be it in the father figure, the husband or the son as the case may be, to take literally all decisions in her life.

This might prove detrimental and even fatal when disaster strikes. Alone at home, with her children and the elderly, she is often the most important first responder at such crisis moments - and it is not necessary that the man of the house is there to take decisions for her as to how to act. Hence, when we talk about empowering a woman and giving her gender equality, we also need to consider how we can empower her to react equally effectively as any male counterpart in moments of unforeseen disaster. This becomes more obligatory because Assam falls under Zone V in terms of disaster risk and even the women need to be prepared as the men, in fact, the women need to be better prepared for she carries the responsibility of the safety and security of her entire household. Hence, seen in these terms, or rather in terms of a holistic attitude towards the empowerment of women, every woman in India in general and in rural India in particular need to be given a boost in their self-worth and self-esteem; they should be given the power to control their lives from all sectors; they should be made proficient to be able to influence the direction of social change, economic affairs – even at the times of a natural calamity or a disaster. No disaster can be predicted – but we can surely plan what to do after a disaster strikes viz., in the relief operations. Speaking in terms of this paper, the disaster relief efforts - should develop a rights-based approach whereby women’s rights are promoted and safeguarded so that she has the belief that she is empowered to act in times of a disaster.

## II. Understanding Empowerment

Empowerment refers to a development of skills, resources, authority, opportunity, motivation so that they can hold themselves responsible and accountable for outcomes of their actions. This way they are given the power and confidence to take initiative and make decisions, to solve problems and improve service and performance.

For the sake of this paper, we are taking into consideration the empowering of women at the times of a disaster – preparing them in such a manner that they are confident to act at the times of a disaster. This requires a rights based approach and an approach of all inclusiveness while designing disaster management relief operations – completely negating issues of gender inequality – with a special consideration of the specific needs of the women – not because they are merely ‘needs’ but because women also have a right to the basic facilities of life and health at all times.

### II. i. Understanding Gender and adopting a Gender Approach

Gender is a cultural construct for how a society looks at women differs from society to society. It is often the society that decides that it is 'right' for a girl to be obedient, modest, to be quite when men are around and to grow up to be good mothers. Again it is the society that decides that it is 'wrong' for the boy to be cry at the smallest instance, to be scared and cowardly. The child grows up looking and perceiving all these and though not innate, these ideas are slowly imbibed in his /her personality. The fault lies in the fact that more often than not we end up making assumptions about the gender differences without thinking gravely about them. With these realisations, it becomes necessary that we study the problems of women in the context of their existence. In all planned developmental activities it is necessary that we adopt a "gender approach" which will consider the social differences between men and women.

This becomes more necessary in disaster situations. Disasters that occurred in vastly different places and myriad populations have proved one thing in common – the most affected are the women and the children. Hence, this group needs to be focussed upon in relief and reconstruction efforts. A rights based approach must be adopted so that women's rights are protected and safeguarded – whether be it socio-economic and cultural rights or civil and political rights.

### III. Objective

The objective of this paper is to adopt a gender sensitive, rights based approach while planning a scheme for disaster management plan, with a prime focus on not only the needs of the women but also their rights.

### IV. Women in Rural India and Gender Inequality – Disaster Situations

Indian women, primarily rural Indian women have been shackled for centuries in shackles of rituals, traditions and social taboos. Literally they remained behind the *pardah* or the *ghunghat* – almost a symbolic representation of fact that life in all its totality was never allowed for the rural women populace in India. Hence, it is often noticed that in situations of any natural disaster, they are incapable of taking any major decisions or bringing themselves forward to avail basic amenities delivered as relief operations too. By nature, as if the women folk have been moulded to place the needs of the family before their own. So, in rescue and relief operations, in times of distribution of food and materials too – we see lesser women pushing behind the man folk to get food for themselves. There might be many factors that influence this act of theirs – their sacrificial nature, the gathering of men around the place, the inability to fight for the food distributed, the distribution of food and other materials by men folk they are not acquainted with, and in some cases the asking for special favours by the men who do the distribution. Hence, the gender inequality becomes very detrimental at times of a disaster when it is a question of survival. Given these situations, the saying that 'survival of the fittest' appears to be perfectly describe the crisis situation that every women struck by disaster finds herself in.

### V. Fostering Gender Sensitivity, Social Inclusiveness and Looking at the Gender Approach in Disaster Management

When disaster strikes, it affects men and women together and with the same intensity and magnitude. But, once the disaster has happened, we need to realise that, in India, we are dealing with a society which is segregated in matters of caste, religion and ethnicity. Hence, fostering gender sensitivity which leads on to gender equality becomes all the more important. Along with this, it becomes important to adopt an approach of social inclusiveness – an approach where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs are met with so they can live in dignity. Women need to be included in all rescue and relief operations and the society sensitised to the fact that beyond the different needs of the man and the woman in a society, it is also a fundamental right of every woman to get access to matters of life and health. The focus needs to be beyond the needs factor.

#### a. Immediate Response During Disaster Relief Phase

The issue of gender inequality being a reality and evidenced – special care needs to be taken to make the efforts indiscriminatory between men and women. The measures to be adopted for the relief should be modelled after:

- i. **Identifying the specific needs of women taking into consideration, their physical and mental makeup:** A woman has to pass through many phases during her life- and hence, while planning for immediate relief operations, it becomes sensible to include women's goods as sanitary napkins, special medicines for lactating mothers and pregnant women, baby foods etc. Care should also be taken to include women in the mode of distribution so that the women do not experience any mental impediments in the collection of the same. A focus on gender sensitivity will recognise the privacy needs and will insist on setting up separate toilets for women. This is it believed will resist many occurrences of sexual abuse during a disaster situation. Women need to be made aware that their safety and security fall under their fundamental rights. Respecting the specific needs of the women will pave the way to gender equality and hence empowerment in the right sense of the term.
- ii. **Ensuring the inclusion of women's specific requirements in emergency relief supplies:** It is the woman of the house who knows best how to handle the food and other related matters of the household. This will help include food items and cooking provisions in the 'food basket' for women, children and lactating mothers. The presence of a woman in the immediate relief operations will ensure that all the specific requirement so of the women will be met with.
- iii. **Necessity of women's aid distribution to be handled by women:** As hinted at earlier – it is necessary for women to be a part of the distribution process. A rights-based approach will make women a part of the women's aid distribution group making it easier to access the women struck in a disaster.

If women are trained on their rights, they can vouch for immediate relief measures taking into consideration all these issues – identify the needs of this vulnerable group and chart out a gender sensitive plan. A rights-based approach will empower women to sufficient and adequate food fit for human consumption – respecting the dignity of women. Gender sensitivity will work towards gender equality and will empower women at times of a disaster without issues of citizenship, migration, registration, medical insurance and other formalities – looking at woman as an individual in disaster. This will be an implementation of the

right to health services as a fundamental human right guaranteed by Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. This will be empowerment in the real sense of the term.

**b. Mid-Term Response During Recovery Phase**

A rights-based approach will also ensure that women get equal access to compensation, payments and rehabilitation measures by making them a part of camp management teams, camp decision making, camp layout designing, information about relief and rehabilitation measures. An all-inclusive, gender sensitive and hence, gender equal rights-based approach will take into considerations even those women who are segregated by cultural and religious constraints.

**c.Long Term Response During Reconstruction Phase:**

A rights-based approach will also ensure that women are included in consultative and decision-making processes in camp administration and disaster management committees in policy making bodies for reconstruction efforts so that the needs of the women's (which are normally side tracked) are addressed. This way woman's and family needs are met with in reconstruction of houses and ensures that women have equal ownership to right of land, house and property.

For ages women have been lifeline of their communities. In times of disaster, women have forever emerged as survivors beyond the victims. Hence, this lifeline of the community rightfully needs to be brushed above discriminatory behaviour and gender equality and be empowered to be a part of a solution, a part of the reweaving of the social fabric of life and part of the healing process. In their families they have always played the role of the leading survival systems. It is now time to empower them outside their homes – and include them in the making and remaking of society. Reconstruction programmes should focus on women's economic empowerment and by offering them income generating opportunities with a female side to it.

**VI. Conclusion:**

What emerges is the fact that while it is the woman who has the entire responsibility of the family and home, and by nature, is the last to feed herself, during the disaster situation too, it is she who is the topmost in of the first responders. Hence, along with obligatory education of the women which will assure her minimal economic independence in times of peace, she needs to be moulded to grow up with a part of the entire disaster management preparation and relief programmes in an obligatory manner – not only because it is the need of the hour but because this inclusiveness is her right. While on the one hand, she should be made aware of her rights – which will lead to her real empowerment, on the other hand management plans should take care to include women needs into consideration.

Thus, we can achieve gender equality and women empowerment only by mobilising and empowering women to advocate their human rights by breaking the patriarchal mould and asserting their rights to have national identity cards, separate bank accounts, land and property rights. This attempt at gender equality and empowerment will come full circle only if women are provided with necessary skills to face new challenges as heads of households subsequent to the unfortunate disappearance or death of the male member – empowered beyond gender inequality. This way, it is hoped that women's rights will be not only promoted but also safeguarded but will also give them confidence to lead life to the fullest enjoying all the fundamental rights in every sphere of human life – be it political, economic, social, civil and cultural. Once these issues are addressed, gender bias and discrimination – the discriminations against women will be eliminated resulting in healthy women population.