



Women and disaster risk reduction

A Nepal case study

Women building safer communities in South Asia

Men and women have different vulnerabilities, needs and capacities within the disaster context. The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement recognises that disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives in South Asia can only succeed when women's capacities, knowledge and skills are recognised and utilised at each stage of the disaster management cycle.

The majority of South Asian women have comparatively less access to education, resources, and income-generating opportunities but shoulder heavy economic and social burdens. This is the root cause of women's increased vulnerability in disasters. A gender aware approach with full and equal participation of men and women is required to mitigate hazards, reduce social vulnerabilities and build disaster resilient communities.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is working to create an enabling environment that will provide women with support, skills, and information needed to build social, economic, and community assets. The integration of a gender perspective into Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) action is an important strategy towards the fulfilment of the International Federation's humanitarian mandate to improve the lives of the most vulnerable. The 27th International Conference of the RCRC states that the International Federation is committed to ensuring equal opportunities for women and men of all ages as volunteers. This supports the UN Millennium Development Goal number three which aims to promote gender equality and empower women.

National Societies in South Asia are currently implementing and expanding DRR programmes through their ongoing "Building Safer Communities" initiative, which is in line with the International Federation's commitment to support the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA). The objective of this initiative is to reduce vulnerability and the impact of natural disasters by strengthening community resilience and preparing them to cope with risks posed by natural hazards. It is therefore vital that RCRC societies in the region actively work on mainstreaming gender in all programmes and activities by encouraging more female participation in all disaster management programmes.



Earthquake Preparedness in the Kathmandu valley

Being home to the highest mountain ranges in the world and sitting astride the Indian and Eurasian plates, Nepal is a country which is highly vulnerable to earthquakes, especially in the valley region around Kathmandu. Considering these geological conditions, the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) has been implementing the "Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Preparedness Initiative" (KVEPI) program through its three district chapters in the Valley.

The program (September 2003- June 2005) covered ten wards, from three districts of Kathmandu valley, based on their susceptibility to earthquakes. Three wards were selected from Kathmandu Metropolitan City, one from Kirtipur Municipality, two from Baktapur Municipality, one from Madhyampur Thimi Municipality and three from Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City. The \$211,000 initiative was funded by USAID/OFDA through the American Red Cross, targeting 250,000 beneficiaries.

The objectives of this initiative were:

- To build the disaster management capacity of NRCS at the national, district and sub-chapter level
- To build the disaster preparedness and response capability of communities through RC staff
- To increase public awareness about earthquake safety and preparedness practices at the ward level

A focus of the programme was to strengthen disaster preparedness and response capacity of the communities at ward level with special emphasis on women's participation at all levels. To monitor the impact of women's participation in the programme, questionnaires, focus group discussions, secondary data analysis and interviews among both community members and those trained in the programme areas were conducted. Both men and women participated in the group discussions. Participation of women of various age groups and from different ethnic backgrounds made the discussions more balanced and fruitful. It was found that the use of female facilitators led to increased participation by women during the interviews and focus group discussions.

The Red Cross training increased women's knowledge of disaster preparedness and their understanding of earthquake risks and preparedness measures. They were encouraged to identify both the capacities and vulnerabilities within their communities. The training boosted the women's confidence and reassured them that they can prepare their communities in case of earthquake. As a result of the training, women gathered to form "mothers' clubs" in many communities. They meet at regular intervals discussing community issues including: disaster preparedness, the creation of revolving emergency funds (similar to micro-credit) and the monthly savings of handfuls of paddy. These were the key mechanisms to ensure sustainability of the program while enhancing social cohesion and community ownership.

Working towards a gender balanced National Society

The Nepal Red Cross Society is working actively towards building a gender balanced national society. A 'Women's Development Section' was established in the NRCS in 1998 to promote gender awareness at all levels of NRCS and to increase women's membership and participation in the organization. A key focus was to support women in leadership and management roles.



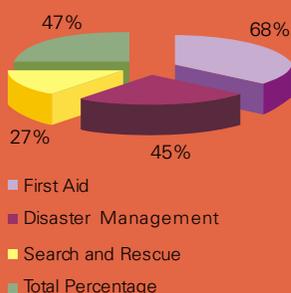
A baseline survey conducted by the section in 2005 revealed that women's participation in NRCS activities was 35.4%. Female membership in NRCS had increased from 12% in 1998 to 19.8% in 2005. In terms of female representation within NRCS there are concerns. Recent surveys show that the rate of female membership in District Chapter Committees of the NRCS is 10.6% and in Sub District Chapter Committees it is 12%. Women make up only 16.5% of the staff members of NRCS. There is an urgent need to increase the number of women in key decision-making roles. Higher levels of women's participation in District and Sub District Committees and in the NRCS staffing is one way in which this could be achieved.

Base line survey (2005)

Female membership in NRCS	19.8 %
Percentage of women in District Chapter committees	10.6%
Percentage of women in Sub Chapter committees	12%

Women's involvement in KVEPI training programmes

Percentage of Female Participation



Through the programme, a Disaster Management Committee (DMC) was established in every ward. These are comprised of 10-12 members including local government representatives, local NGOs/clubs, and civil society. The inclusion of three to four women in each committee paved the way for a core decision-making group for planning and implementing the activities. Though the presence of women at the higher levels is still inadequate, the overall participation of women in ward level DMCs is around 24 %, which is double as much as women representation in any other level of the NRCS.

Another example of good practice in the program is sharing and exchanging information on disaster preparedness activities by the NRCS with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) through DP-Net Nepal. NRCS has been able to efficiently coordinate its activities with the LWF, who are also working on earthquake preparedness programs. This helped in avoiding replication and provided trained volunteers for facilitating their programme. NRCS has also coordinated with the government's earthquake preparedness venture by engaging trained groups of KVEPI to participate in the large scale simulation program carried out by the government.

The above figure indicates that among the different modules of KVEPI training, Search and Rescue had 27 % of female participation. This is very encouraging considering that Search and Rescue is primarily a male dominated activity given the socio- cultural patterns of gendered division of labour in Nepalese society. First Aid had 68% of women's participation, which indicates that women given a chance to acquire skills and capacities will participate in community-based activities. These examples show that with community support and encouragement from the authorities women excel in their perceived roles and begin to develop their skills in other areas.

Challenges

There were many successes in increasing women's participation in risk reduction activities through the KVEPI training. However, increasing women's participation at all stages of the KVEPI project cycle remains a challenge.

- There is inadequate female participation in the planning and implementation phase owing to a lack of female staff at all levels of NRCS and in the community who could assume decisive roles
- At the implementation phase few women are available to take a lead role
- More trained female volunteers and facilitators are needed
- Refresher courses to update and refresh their skills are needed
- Inadequate post training support from the district chapters

- Identification of a community focal person in all ten wards of the first phase of KVEPI is required
- A longer implementation period is required so that training can be given in a more comprehensive manner





Lessons learned

The NRCS experience with the KVEPI demonstrates the value of building the capacity of local volunteers. There is a need to continue training in order to strengthen the community's capacity and keep them prepared. Information gathered from the field was used to identify the following recommendations:

- There is a need to advocate for more female involvement at all stages of the disaster management cycle
- More women are needed in core decision-making groups, both at the NRCS headquarters and program implementation areas
- Dissemination of preparedness messages during major community gatherings are a good way to increase awareness
- Building community ownership for sustainability of the programme takes time
- Components such as awareness on women's rights and safety tips need to be incorporated into the refresher course
- Modules on minimum standards in relief, humanitarian values, and psycho-social support should be incorporated in the training
- Women need more exposure to disaster risk reduction initiatives through visits and interaction with other communities and National Societies

The way forward

The NRCS experience with the KVEPI demonstrates that women have the capacity to be key actors in natural disaster mitigation because of their ability to protect their families and households and their involvement in community-based activities. A concerted effort is required to involve women equally with men at all levels of decision-making positions. Involving women and men in disaster preparedness plans is required so that priorities are identified that meet the specific needs of the community as a whole. This would be an important step towards building safer and more resilient households and communities.

Trailblazers show the way...



Narbadha Sharma has given 32 years of service to the NRCS and has been a representative at the NRCS Central Executive Committee five times. She is currently the chairwoman of the Banke branch and has played a number of roles, including the overall management of the district chapter, facilitating decision-making processes, volunteer mobilization and the overall coordination of women's development activities. While acknowledging the role of the women's development section at NRCS headquarters as a step forward, she believes that there exist within the Red Cross challenges for attaining senior leadership positions because many people try to discourage their participation.

"It is important to reduce women's dependency at the grassroot level and to work on self- help initiatives such as livelihood programmes. Concessions should be given to women on NRCS memberships and their income generation skills should be improved."

Narbadha Sharma
Chairwoman, Banke Branch
NRCS

Sharma's ideas to improve gender balance within NRCS:

- Efforts should be concentrated at the sub-chapter level.
- Generating women members is not enough - training is vital in leadership and management
- It is important to include women at the branch level for better access to opportunities
- Mentoring and coaching of women will make a significant difference
- More representation of women at the NRCS general assembly
- Important to create an environment that encourages women to participate in elections

Kiran Shresth Joshi is on the executive committee of the Bardiya branch and has been an active volunteer for 20 years. She works to motivate more women to become involved as trainers, and recommends sending these women to NHQ for further training. She has been involved in the 2007 flood response in relief distribution, information sharing with other agencies and NGOs, and in monitoring relief stocks.

Her ideas for increasing women's participation in NRCS

- Develop more life members (both male and female) in NRCS. However, it is very expensive for poor women to join as it costs Rs. 1025 to become a NRCS life member
- Junior RC circle is a useful way to generate more volunteers because they spread the word within their families



"At the community level, women's timeframes and responsibilities should be considered when setting timings for trainings/meetings."

Kiran Shresth Joshi
Member,
Executive Committee
Bardiya Branch, NRCS

Two voices from Kathmandu



☞☞ At the time of recent political instability and conflict due to insurgency problems, RC volunteers including women with FA training were stationed to provide help. ☞☞

Sangita



☞☞ I was so obsessed with the fear of earthquake that I forced my uncles who were about to construct houses to build them according to the earthquake safety measures, and my insistence did prove fruitful when they contacted NSET and built houses according to the specifications. This incident gave me a lot of satisfaction as I could see my learning having an impact on not only myself but my family members also. ☞☞

Indira Paudel

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering. The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

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