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Rajesh Dhungel and Ram Nath Ojha

It is generally accepted that women overall are more vulnerable to disaster risk and have specific needs during a crisis. But in Nepal, social taboos and norms restrict women's freedom to express their needs to humanitarian workers in times of crisis, as these are normally strangers to the community deputed by humanitarian agencies or state agencies. These norms are deep-rooted in Nepal and other South Asian countries, and they increase the vulnerability of women to disaster risks, be they natural or man-made. In this context, starting in 2008, the Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian programme (DRR-HP) in Nepal has introduced Women's Empowerment as a key component of community-based disaster risk reduction interventions in different DRR-HP projects. Altogether, 42 Women's Empowerment Centres (WECs), each with 30 women participants, have been supported to lead DRR and emergency response work in their local communities. The WECs have become a successful way of reducing socio-economic and physical vulnerability in the community, as well as an important means of strengthening women's empowerment and leadership.

Il est généralement accepté que les femmes sont globalement plus vulnérables face aux risques de catastrophe et ont des besoins particuliers durant une crise. Cependant, au Népal, les tabous et les normes sociaux limitent la liberté des femmes à exprimer leurs besoins aux travailleurs humanitaires en temps de crise, car ces derniers sont en général des étrangers pour la communauté, délégués par des agences humanitaires ou des organismes de l'État. Ces normes sont profondément ancrées au Népal et dans d'autres pays sud-asiatiques, et elles accroissent la vulnérabilité des femmes face aux risques de catastrophes, naturelles ou causées par l'Homme. Dans ce contexte, à partir de 2008, le Programme humanitaire et de réduction des risques de catastrophe (Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian programme (DRR-HP)) au Népal a introduit l'autonomisation des femmes comme un élément clé des interventions communautaires de réduction des risques de catastrophe dans différents projets du DRR-HP. Ce sont 42 «Centres d'autonomisation des femmes» (CAF) en tout, chacun comptant 30 participantes, qui ont été aidés à mener des activités de RRC et d'intervention en situation d'urgence au sein de leurs communautés locales respectives. Les CAF sont

devenus un moyen efficace de réduire la vulnérabilité socio-économique et physique au sein de la communauté, ainsi qu'un important moyen de renforcer l'autonomisation et le leadership des femmes.

Se acepta por lo general que las mujeres son más vulnerables ante los riesgos de desastres y tienen necesidades específicas durante una crisis. Pero en Nepal los tabús y las normas sociales cohiben a las mujeres para expresar sus necesidades a los trabajadores humanitarios en momentos de crisis ya que a menudo las organizaciones humanitarias o agencias gubernamentales los envían pero son personas completamente extrañas para las comunidades. Estas normas tienen una larga tradición en Nepal y en otros países de Asia del Sur y aumentan la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres ante los riesgos de desastres, sean naturales o provocados por el ser humano. En este contexto, a partir de 2008, el Programa Humanitario de Reducción de Riesgos ante Desastres (DRR-HP por sus siglas en inglés) en Nepal incorporó el Empoderamiento de las Mujeres como un elemento clave en diversas acciones del componente Reducción Comunitaria de Riesgos ante Desastres (CBDRR). En total se han apoyado 42 Centros para el Empoderamiento de las Mujeres (CEM), cada uno integrado por 30 mujeres que realizan labores de DRR para enfrentar emergencias en sus comunidades. Los CEM se han convertido en recursos efectivos para reducir la vulnerabilidad socioeconómica y física en las comunidades y para fortalecer a las mujeres y sus liderazgos.

Key words: Women's Empowerment Centre (WEC); Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR); vulnerability; Nepal

Background

Gender inequality is deeply rooted in social and cultural practices and beliefs. Power relations and access to resources or development dividends vary between men and women, and the extent of variation differs from one community to other. In Nepal as elsewhere, it has been observed that women in disaster-prone communities are more vulnerable compared to men, and disasters tend to have a greater negative impact on women than on men. For instance, several studies have revealed that mortality rates for women during a disaster are often several times higher than those of men. During the tsunami in 2004, women accounted for up to 70 per cent of deaths in most of the affected areas (Oxfam International 2005), while a study by Neumayer and Plümper in 2007 found that gender discrimination in developing countries contributed to a higher death toll for women than for men during disasters. The underlying causes of gender inequality need to be explored and discussed in order for this inequality to be addressed. Hence, development practitioners should ensure that awareness of gender

inequality is reflected in action, and local people are empowered to identify the root causes and change socio-cultural practices that discriminate against women.

This article looks at the activities of Women's Empowerment Centres (WEC) in southern Nepal – developed as part of Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian programme (DRR-HP) – and how they are helping to address the root causes of gendered vulnerability to the impacts of flooding. We start by giving an overview of women's vulnerability to disaster in the flood-prone communities in the southern plains of Nepal, where the majority of households depend on remittances sent home by labour migrants, or on casual labour. We then go on to share the experiences of women in the flood-prone areas where Oxfam in Nepal has been implementing DRR-HP, and consider how women are contributing towards building resilient communities. The article is based on a review of partners' reports, and on analysis of focus group discussions held at 37 WECs, visited at random in different programme districts.

Attributes of women's vulnerability to disaster in Nepal

Many different factors contribute to women's vulnerability to disaster in Nepal, including their livelihood activities and domestic work burden, gender discrimination that limits their opportunities to speak out, and social norms that restrict their access to outside agencies offering assistance.

One study conducted by Oxfam in Nawalparasi district revealed that women are mainly responsible for looking after children, preparing food for their family, collecting wood and fodder, and making dung cakes for fuel to cook food, and taking care of livestock. In addition, they are also involved in economic activities as agricultural labourers in neighbouring farms for four months in a year. Men, meanwhile, are engaged in wage-earning activities like casual labour, rickshaw pulling, and working in their own fields. Women's economic activities – both inside and outside the home – are less valued by the society than men's economic activities, and men are in most cases considered to be the breadwinner in the family, irrespective of their livelihood and level of wealth.

As a consequence of the discrimination that women face, and their heavy workload inside and outside the home, women in these areas of Nepal have little opportunity to participate in communal activities and decision-making processes, and their needs and voices are often overlooked. These factors, along with illiteracy, and limited access to and control over resources, make women vulnerable to disaster. In addition, women's and men's different livelihood activities mean that women are more dependent on natural resources compared to men, and that their responsibilities increase during a disaster, as women are more concerned about their children and often remain in their house taking care of household belongings in times of crisis.

Changing climate patterns and the impact they are having on livelihoods are also contributing to increasing women's vulnerabilities during disaster. Due to increasing flood frequency and declining soil fertility, agrarian communities in these regions of Nepal are no longer able to produce sufficient harvest to support themselves. As a result, men are leaving their villages to look for work, even travelling as far as India, leaving women with the additional burden of looking after their farms and families on their own (Brass *et al.* 2008). This feminisation in agriculture is further contributing to less agricultural productivity, as women have so many other responsibilities on top of their agricultural work. This is further decreasing the capacity of these communities to recover following a disaster, and also means that proportionally, women are more likely to be affected, as they are more likely to be present in the villages when disaster strikes.

Overall, this pattern of gender inequality and women's responsibilities in both caring and economic activity multiply the impact of women's vulnerabilities when the floods hit. In addition, social taboos and norms restrict women's freedom to express their needs to humanitarian workers in times of crisis, as these are normally strangers to the community deputed by humanitarian or state agencies (security forces and Nepal Red Cross Team). As a result, previous CBDRR interventions aimed at building the communities' resilience to disaster have often failed to meet women's needs, or make use of their skills and initiative in responding to and managing disaster risk.

Oxfam in Nepal's Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Programme (DRR-HP)

Oxfam's DRR-HP is implemented in the mid hills and plains of Nepal. Oxfam in Nepal has considerable experience of implementing DRR-HP in the flood-prone plain areas, and now this knowledge and experience is being used to shape programme work in the hill areas. The programme covers rural communities in four Terai (plains) and four hill districts; urban communities in two Terai districts; and Kathmandu valley. The programme districts and communities within the districts are selected based on the vulnerability ranking in terms of possible hazards, assessed using Participatory Capacity and Vulnerability Analysis tools (Turvill and De Dios 2009).

Community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM), advocacy for protecting rights in crisis, and humanitarian-response capacity building are the major components of the DRR programme. Unlike traditional CBDRM approaches adopted by many humanitarian organisations, the CBDRM components of Oxfam in Nepal's DRR programme include promotion of climate and/or disaster resilient livelihood options in the vulnerable communities, and the establishment of Women's Empowerment Centres (WECs) that focus on developing women's leadership in CBDRM. The other CBDRM components include early warning systems, establishment of Emergency

Management Funds, training task forces for humanitarian response, and developing risk management plans.

Existing law that focuses on the post-disaster scenario does not adequately address the whole disaster management cycle. Therefore, current advocacy for protecting rights in crisis focuses on influencing policymakers for endorsement of the comprehensive Disaster Management Bill, which was drafted with the support of Oxfam in 2007, as well as mainstreaming DRR in development planning processes. Oxfam in Nepal is supporting people-led advocacy to enable those affected by recurring natural disasters to protect their rights. The Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs) formed by various humanitarian actors, including Oxfam, have formed a network by federating themselves into Village Development Committees (VDC), the smallest administrative unit in Nepal, as well as at district and national level to amplify the voices of disaster affected and/or vulnerable people. The CDMC network has identified DRR issues from the communities, and some district and national networks have developed advocacy strategies to address issues that contribute to protect their rights in crisis.

Work to build Humanitarian Response capacity is done at different levels: at the level of Oxfam programming, with partners, and at government level. Oxfam in Nepal has mapped out potential strategic partners at the local level to respond to humanitarian crisis in non-programme districts, and at category 2 level of disasters (Oxfam International 2011). The humanitarian response capacity building focuses on water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH), Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods (EFSL), and supply chain management. The capacity building also emphasises sensitising partners (government and non-government) on various humanitarian standards and codes of conduct.

WECs, as a major component of Oxfam in Nepal's CBDRM approach, are not just contributing to women's empowerment and leadership at local level, but are also contributing towards other components of CBDRM. For instance, all the WEC groups are involved in disaster response planning in their communities, and in generating and operating Emergency Management Funds (EMFs).

Role of WECs in disaster risk management in DRR-HP areas

Oxfam in Nepal introduced WECs through DRR-HP in 2008; since then, the approach has been replicated by other programmes and in different DRR-HP projects. Altogether, 42 women's groups were formed to lead DRR and emergency response work in their local communities, each with 30 women participants. The members of the group are selected from the community, with preference given to engaging illiterate and marginalised women from disadvantaged groups within communities that are themselves already vulnerable. WEC members are then invited to meet regularly for two hours at a time (at times agreed among the group) over a period of nine months,

to identify problems facing women in the community, determine their root causes, and develop plans to address the problems that have been identified. Members are also encouraged and supported to develop their literary skills. Discussions are moderated by a facilitator and co-facilitator also selected from the same community and intensively trained by Oxfam GB Nepal. Facilitation techniques are based on the REFLECT approach.

REFLECT is an acronym for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. The REFLECT approach uses a combination of the adult-literacy teaching methods developed by Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods. REFLECT supports participants to gain literacy skills, as well as to identify problems that they face and come up with solutions. REFLECT was first piloted in Uganda, Bangladesh, and El Salvador by ActionAid in 1993. Oxfam in Nepal has been using the approach in its DRR-HP since 2008, to develop women's leadership within CBDRM. REFLECT has now been adopted by all three of Oxfam in Nepal's thematic programmes: (1) DRR and Humanitarian Programme for Rights in Crisis; (2) Public Health and Basic Livelihoods Support Programme (PHABLES), a development programme for Economic Justice; and (3) Advocacy Campaign and Critical Enabling Issues Support (ACCEIS), advocacy and campaign programme for Essential Services and Gender Justice.

Each WEC group develops their own advocacy plan. They then go on to advocate and lobby with district and village authorities to allocate funds for women's empowerment and for skills-based training for women, and to address the issues identified during discussion sessions in the WEC.

Advocacy plans have included addressing problems and issues related to reproductive health, free health services, allocating funding for women's development projects by the VDC, and challenging social and cultural practices and taboos that increase women's vulnerability during times of crisis. For instance, a WEC group in Saptari lobbied for funds to support pregnant women to give birth safely, attended by trained medical personnel, and has also lobbied the District Health Post Office (DPHO) to start up mobile health camps. The DPHO now visits the community once a month to provide free health checks. The same group also organised a campaign for women in the community to be issued with citizenship certificates. Earlier, few women had citizenship certificates, meaning they could not claim entitlement to land ownership or register property in their own names. All of these activities are helping to reduce women's vulnerability, and hence, to strengthen their resilience in times of crisis.

The WEC groups have also been advocating with VDC and District authorities specifically on DRR issues. For instance, women from the WECs began participating in the VDC and District Council to advocate for funds for DRR, while the WEC in Saptari and Nawalparasi succeeded in allocating resources for establishing evacuation routes.

WECs also carry out DRR activities in their own communities. Some of the DRR initiatives and emergency response activities carried out by the WECs include the following.

Protecting agricultural land

The women in one community were involved in construction of a bio-engineering embankment to prevent river water from washing out agricultural land. The members of the WEC group in Nawalparasi identified poor and vulnerable women in the community and involved them in a cash for work programme to construct an embankment and plant a plantation along the embankment. They constructed a 165 m long embankment, and one-third of a hectare of washed-away land was brought back into cultivation (Figure 1).

Lobbying against destructive practices

WEC participants lobbied the Local Development Officer, Chief District Officer, and Contractor against the excavation of stones and gravel from the neighbouring river and created pressure to stop the excavation of boulders from the river in Gaidatar, in Rautahat district. The WEC group also succeeded in getting NPR 150,000.00 (US\$1,764.71) compensation for excavation work that had already taken place before the decision was made to halt excavation. The decision to forbid the export of sand and

Figure 1: Waste land in Nawalparasi district brought back into cultivation after construction of embankment. Credit: Ram Nath Ojha.



gravel has reduced the vulnerability of 250 households who live near the river and in downstream communities. The group is now lobbying with the District Soil Conservation Office to push for bio-engineering works similar to those outlined in the previous example to protect their community from flash flood as a consequence of excavation work.

Community funds

Most of the WECs have started community funds for economic activities and to cover the costs of emergency response. Some groups have established community grain banks. In times of crisis, grain can be bartered by members of the grain bank to meet their households' food requirements. In years when disaster does not strike, collected grains are sold in the local market and the profits are deposited in the community fund. WEC groups in Saptari have started using money from their community fund to provide support to pregnant women in the community, by providing interest-free loans for delivery services and transportation to health centres for delivery.

Identifying vulnerable members of the community

In the WECs the participants discuss how to design visual signs to indicate particularly vulnerable people, such as pregnant women, lactating mothers, and elderly and disabled people. The signs are then posted on to the main entrance of the households where these people live. Then the women from the WEC form a task group within the community disaster management team to rescue these vulnerable people from their houses and bring them to shelters during floods (Figure 2).

Raising awareness of good WASH practices

WEC participants are involved in disseminating four key water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) messages through door-to-door campaigns: hand washing, safe excreta disposal, Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) preparation, and water purification. They have set up standards against open defecation, and lobby with VDC and the Water Supply and Sanitation Division Office in Sarlahi and Nawalparasi for allocating resources for toilet construction and sanitation awareness programmes.

Sensitising on cross-cutting issues

The WEC facilitators are also working to sensitise participants on other cross-cutting issues that contribute to vulnerability, like mainstreaming the special needs of disabled people, people living with HIV or AIDS, elderly people, and pregnant and lactating women. The aim is to motivate WEC members to help those vulnerable people during crisis.

Figure 2: Women discussing signs to indicate vulnerable households in the target communities in Saptari districts. Credit: Shanta Upadhaya.



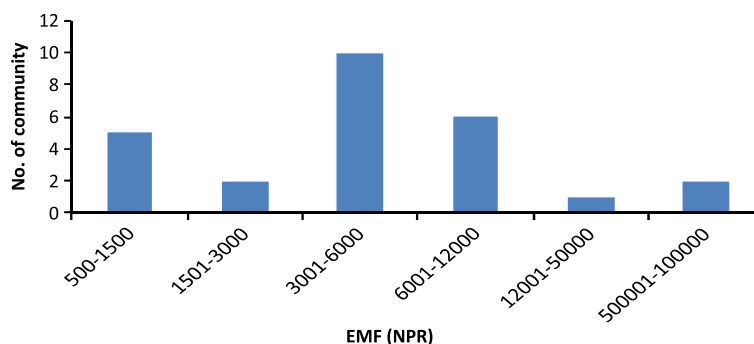
Emergency Management Funds (EMFs)

Out of the 37 WECs visited in the DRR-HP programme districts, 26 groups have generated funds at local level to provide immediate assistance to disaster-affected families in the community. The participants in the WEC took the initiative for saving and credit activity in the group, and 10–20 per cent of their savings are allocated for EMFs. The EMFs range from NPR 500.00 (US\$5.88) to 100,000.00 (US\$1,176.47) per community (Figure 3), depending on how long the WEC has been established (WECs that are in their first year have less money), and the size of outstanding loans and repayment rates. EMFs are able to offer credit to community members both in times of crisis, and for other activities. In emergency cases, people can receive an interest-free loan; in other cases, groups charge 24–36 per cent interest per annum, depending upon the purpose of the loan.

Positive impacts on women's leadership in the community

As a consequence of the WECs, the number of women in Community Disaster Management Committees and task forces has increased. Unlike other women, the

Figure 3: Size of Emergency Management Funds generated by Women's Empowerment Centres in DRR-HP area.



WEC participants are taking a lead and are able to articulate their problems and participate in simulation exercises and other community awareness programmes, which they were previously hesitant to do. Men in some communities have continued to object to women participating in such exercises, but the WEC members have been firm in negotiating with them. For instance, in Rautahat local men disrupted a simulation exercise where women were swimming in a local pond to rescue other women. The WEC participants convinced the men to leave, and the simulation was successful. One of the women members of the search and rescue team said that,

The simulation exercise developed confidence among women and now we don't need to wait for men to rescue people. It is easier to find a woman rescuer as most of the time women remain at home, but men are not readily available in the community at the time of crisis.

With the operation of WECs in the DRR-HP districts, women in the communities included in the programme have also become much more forthright in speaking up about their needs and priorities, and in communicating these to outside agencies. One of the WEC facilitators during a focus group discussion in Nawalparasi mentioned that:

[It] had been very hard to express women's needs to humanitarian workers a few years before but these days, due to women's participation in WEC and their involvement in different DRR and Humanitarian works women feel free to express their needs and women have emerged as social change makers.

Table 1: Women's role in disaster risk management in the DRR-HP programme area

Pre-disaster involvement	During disaster involvement	Post-disaster involvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Female Community Health Workers (FCHVs) are involved in vaccination campaigns, and disseminating knowledge on sanitation and safe hygiene practices. This has increased awareness among communities about the possibility of epidemics in the aftermath of flooding due to contamination of water sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Psychosocial counselling to the other members of the group and children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sell household assets over which they have control, like poultry and goats, to meet household basic needs. During emergency they are compelled to sell their valuable assets at low prices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Household-level preparedness measures like protecting seeds and grains by making raised platforms or storing goods in the grain bank prior to the monsoon. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fulfil needs of family members by collecting wild foods like fish, snails, arvi (an edible plant), etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work in the homestead (gardening and raising livestock).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mock drill or simulation exercise for search and rescue, evacuation, early warning, and First Aid during emergency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mobilise EMF for needy households in the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect fuel wood and fodder.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain Emergency Management Fund (EMF) in the group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Carry relief items from the distribution point to the household/camp. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Screening of disabled people, pregnant women and lactating mothers, and elderly people, and erecting signs to mark the houses where these people live to draw attention to their particular vulnerability. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lobby Disaster Management Committees and local authorities to address the issues identified by women in the WEC. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read the flood marker and inform the Community Disaster Management Committee and contact person in downstream communities. 		

Women's role in disaster risk management in the flood-prone Southern plains of Nepal

Generally women as a whole in the communities where WECs are active are now performing multiple roles for disaster risk management at household and community level. This can be better illustrated by Table 1.

Conclusion

The WEC approach is effective in building resilient communities as it ensures better disaster preparedness at household and community level. The WEC operated through the REFLECT approach is also sustainable, as the most vulnerable groups are empowered to identify their own issues for prioritisation, and develop action plans to address them, in order to enable communities to help themselves. The advocacy plans also help women to know about the relevant stakeholders (duty bearers) to access to raise their issues. The saving and credit schemes are one of the by-products of the WEC. These motivate women's economic activity, and allow them to establish risk-sharing mechanisms in the form of EMFs and community funds. The replication and scaling up of the WEC approach will not only ensure Oxfam's principle of 'putting women's rights at the heart of all we do', but will also contribute to protecting the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people in the face of disasters.

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