

Women And Children: Double Victims of Disasters



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ABSTRACT

Women and children, the most vulnerable groups of the society, who are normally dependent on families, peer groups and kinship structures for their basic needs and security, are completely disoriented during the various disasters. Providing speedy and equitable humanitarian assistance to these vulnerable groups should be the first and foremost responsibility of the Administration and others who are involved to help them. Researcher concluded that the basic key to prevent double victimization of women and children in the aftermath of disasters is by ensuring fair distribution of humanitarian aid amongst these unorganized beneficiaries, irrespective of their age and gender and stressing upon increased women's participation in all stages of post - disaster management within the Fundamental Rights under the Constitution.

Introduction :

Disasters, be they natural or man-made, are a great threat to the well being of mankind. Over the centuries, man has borne the brunt of infinite disasters which have taken a heavy toll on life, and its different aspects such as, health, shelter, livelihood, social fabric and even basic survival needs.

Disasters are very sorrowful experiences, which are even more so when one becomes a helpless victim to them. The various consequences and the aftermath of disasters leave behind a plethora of issues to be handled. Commonly, almost all disasters, despite their diverse origins, have similar kinds of impacts on man viz., death, disability, loss of property, loss of livelihood, abandonment, separation, violence, exploitation, and dislocation; each one, with a great extent of trauma attached to it, which has different implications on different impactees. Very often, only the immediate deaths and destructions get over estimated because of their easy detection and high visibility. However, numerous indirect deaths and other sufferings of the impactees due to additional factors like diseases, and social and economic exploitations occurring after the event get out of the purview of disaster estimations. There are several other potential impacts of disasters on the people and their households, that very diverse, according to their socio-economic con-

ditions and hazard coping capacities. Universally, experience shows that people with the lowest incomes are more vulnerable in all ways, as they generally live in the lowest quality houses, in the worst locations and with the least opportunities to recover from the disasters when they occur. Unfortunately, there are also other weaker sections of the society, especially women and children, that are most vulnerable who face many other adverse consequences of disasters other than the ones experienced by everybody else.

Double Victimization of women and children.

Previously, there had been no systematic effort to document the anti-social impacts of disasters on children and women. The only impacts that were documented were those that could be easily identified and compared directly to expected income, employment or health benefits through simplistic monetary measures. But of late, modest attempts have been made to illustrate the disaster - induced miseries of these vulnerable sections, which are inordinately unprotected even in non-disaster situations.

Women and children, the most vulnerable groups of the society, who are normally dependent on families, peer groups and kinship structures for their basic needs and security, are completely disoriented during disasters without their support, and are prone to a number of anti-social acts and atrocities without their protection.

Hence it is found that these vulnerable masses become double victims to disasters.

(i) Children:

Children, as an age category, are subject to particularly perverse consequences in times of any crises. Primarily, during disasters, hundreds of children are orphaned and left homeless to fend for themselves. On one hand, the orphans bear the scar of the disasters for the whole of their lives, while on the other, they are at times used as pawns by greedy relatives to grab land and properties, and compensations and other aids from governments and NGOs, and finally are left in the lurch after being taken everything. With adoption near to impossible, these kinds of situations leave the orphans with traumatized state of mind which leads to socially unacceptable activities such as beggary, exploitation, theft and robbery, etc.

Secondly, the disasters increase the number of school drop-outs, by forcing the children to take up work to supplement their family incomes, thus causing educational loss to them. Consequently, in the aftermath of disasters, there is a steep rise in the incidence of child labour, bonded labour and forced labour in hazardous work, etc., thereby creating scope for child abuse. And also, with money in hand, children especially boys take to gambling, smoking, drugs, alcohol, etc. All these factors create socially and physically unhealthy living conditions for children.

And lastly, children particularly girls fall prey to unsocial activities like prostitution, sexual harassment and exploitation, forced marriages to widowers and to men double their age, etc. Often, female children are more vulnerable to the harsh consequences of disasters than their male counterpart. But commonly enough, disasters double victimize scores of children, irrespective of age and gender, causing them to grow up overnight, shedding their childhood and innocence even before understanding the hard facts of life.

(ii) Women :

Women, comprising of widows, the deserted, the physically disabled, the chronically ill,

and the old, are also identified as one of the weakest among the vulnerable who suffer more in the aftermath of disasters. Their vulnerability basically arises from their already precarious social status, which limits their access to resources and to information. So disasters in their wake not only alter the women's social roles but also make them prone to other worst situations, thus double victimizing them.

Primarily, women as widows experience the grief of losing their husbands: on one hand, they feel the emptiness in life without their spouse, while on the other, they are under tremendous pressure from relatives to share properties, ex-gratia payments, compensations, etc. And ultimately with whatever meager resources left under their control, they assume additional and often entire responsibilities of the household like caring for children, the elderly and the sick.

Secondly, in disaster-affected communities, many women face desertions, divorces and threats of re-marriages from their spouses and the latter's relatives due to their physical disability to conceive, or inability to bear 'male' child. Some among those, who are unable to cope up with the pressure to conceive, or the threats of breakup of marriage, show signs of pseudo-pregnancy and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And lastly, disaster vulnerabilities compel many women to expand their efforts to earn a wage (or higher wage), especially in the lower and informal sectors of the economy, which often makes them victims of a hostile and exploitative system, and places them at the receiving end of domestic clashes and violence. Worst still is the situation for widows and deserted women who voluntarily resort to prostitution just to survive. But whereas at time, there are incidents where young girls and women are brought from calamity affected areas with a false assurance of jobs and better life, and are forced into prostitution. But sadly enough, one tragic fact about prostitution is that it continues even after the emergency ends.

So in the post-disaster environment, women's security and privacy are repeatedly violated in several ways.

Conclusion :

Due to disaster impacts; some die, some migrate and some others prosper. Worst hit are the women and children who lack the means to ensure their own survival, safety and security. Disasters induce double misery on both women and children, who are inordinately unprotected even in non-disaster situations, and leave them with suppressed frustration and agonizing pain for life. In a nutshell, irrespective of the origin, age and gender of these vulnerable groups, the disasters cause a gross violation of their human rights guaranteed under the constitution of India and propagated by various international organizations like, the United Nations, the International Federation of the Red cross and the red crescent, etc.

Therefore, providing speedy and equitable humanitarian assistance to these vulnerable groups should be the first and foremost responsibility of the State administration and others involved in such activities to help them to come back to normally. Initiatives have to be taken to set up special shelter homes for these destitute groups to prevent worsening of their conditions,

and to provide them with education facilities, skill - based trainings, jobs, loans, etc. to secure their lives and livelihoods and raise their living standards above pre-disaster levels. In this regard, extra care and attention has to be paid to their special needs and wants (food, medicines, clothing's, sanitation, security, etc.), who belong to various age groups, particularly infants, pregnant and lactating women, the old and the crippled, and the injured and the disabled.

The major step in this direction is to involve these groups, mainly women who are known to be the best caretakers and ensures of everybody's safety, in the preparation of relief and recovery policies based on their experiences and felt needs. Thus, the basic key to prevent double victimization of women and children in the aftermath of disasters is by ensuring fair distribution of humanitarian aid amongst these unorganized beneficiaries, irrespective of their age & gender; and by stressing upon increased women's participation in all stages of post - disaster management through voicing of their needs and wants, and their rights and standards for a healthy survival, those which reflect their culture, tradition, special needs and aspirations in consonance with the Fundamental Rights under the Constitution.

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