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Participatory Disaster Management Programme

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Gender Issues in Disaster

In Nepal, the gender issue is literally the issue of women because, the women are bearing heavier brunt of social and economic backwardness. Female literacy rate is only 25 percent as against 36 percent in the case of men. Women's workload in agriculture and livestock rearing is higher than that of men. Nepal and Maldives are the only two countries in the world where the life expectancy of female at birth is less than that of men.

The ?s the outcome of an empirical study conducted in all the project sites – two project sites in Syangja district (Kahule village in Bahakot VDC and Bhanjyang, Faudipakha in Oreste VDC) and other two sites in Tanahu district (Risti and Kyamin VDCs) two project sites in Chitwan district (Bhandara and Kathar) and two sites in Bardiya district (Bardiya Municipality ward No. 6 and Pandaha VDC).

The first exercise on gender analysis was to find out who among the two genders suffer most from the disaster. Although the incidence of disaster and being its victim is equally painful for everybody, the inquiry revealed that the women bear larger amount of pain during and after any disaster. The additional sufferings of the women are listed as follows:

- q The pain to women (mothers) of the loss of off-spring (from the disaster) is more because they carry the off-spring in the womb for full 9 months and face high pain and risk during delivery.
- q When disaster affects the income and food security, it is the jewelry of women which is sold first to meet the deficit household expenditure.
- q Because of the existence of patriarchal attitude among the people, women have to eat less when the food is not enough due to disaster effect.
- q In order to support the family, the able-bodied male members of the family migrate to towns, cities or even foreign countries in search of jobs and the female as the de-facto head of household has to face the ground realities.
- q When women have to migrate to new destination as a result of the disaster, they face relatively bigger adjustment problems.

The expression of a woman about the disaster and shock and the hope she mustered from the project activities and her concern is presented in the Box below.

Box 1: Disaster, Revival of Hope and Fear of Discontinuity

Ms. Til Maya Gurung, the Chairperson of the Women's group for Disaster Mitigation in Kahule, Syangja district says:

“I was a very active person. But I have lost all senses after that ghastly landslide of Bhadra 13, 2055(September 1998) in the village. Even the enemies should not suffer from such incidence. Now that the project has started support, I am feeling little more confident that I do not have to leave the village. My worry is whether the project would continue in the future at least for next 4-5 years”.

Participation of Women in Project Activities

The organizational design of the project is very good from the gender perspective. In most cases, the male and female groups are formed separately because the needs and priorities of the men and women differ. The female specific issues and activities are discussed in the female group and the male specific problems and activities are discussed in the male group. Then there is a joint executive committee of the two groups where the output of both group meetings are further discussed and endorsed. In Kyamin and Risti VDC of Tanahu, the representation of women members is more than that of men (7 out of 13) in the executive committee including the female Chairperson in Kyamin. The participation of women in the project activities including decision making was therefore found to be very satisfactory.

Women's Needs

The women beneficiaries in the project sites were met by the study team separately to solicit their views about the project as well as to document their special needs. Many of them were able to express their concerns without inhibitions. They said very succinctly that once we have this disaster mitigation project in our village, no development projects other than regular government and local body activities come to the village. Then who will support for our other needs? They then rightly suggested that the project intervention needs to be holistic with slightly more focus on disaster mitigation activities. When asked what are the women's other pressing needs, they listed it as follows

- q Women need more social mobilization input because of their low level of literacy and lack of general awareness. But the mobilization period in the project has been far less than required. They also demand refresher courses in adult and functional literacy. Most women could write their own name but not of others.
- q Women in the village have to do the cooking and the currently used source of energy is fuelwood. The kitchen is full of smoke during cooking which has affected the health of women. So, they need technical and subsidy support for improved smokeless oven. Bio-gas is another better alternative but it is expensive and therefore not affordable.
- q Women are responsible for fetching water for drinking and for the animals. In the months of April and May, the nearby water sources dry up and the drinking water has to be brought from the distant wells. These wells are not well protected. So there is a need to have tap water or at least the protection of the wells.
- q Most of the houses in the village do not have sanitary toilets. It is difficult for women to use open toilets and hence they need support for toilet construction.
- q Although the traditional practice of giving “Pewa (private possession)” and “Daijo (personal gifts)” from the parents and relatives to the female usually during and after the marriage has been instrumental in fulfilling their petty cash needs, they feel the need for training on various income generating skills to have more economic independence within the family.

Impending Impact

Since the project has been started only recently, it is quite premature to have an impact on the lives of the local people. Nevertheless, there are some indications that the project will have considerable impact in the following areas as revealed by the current development of the process:

- q Women are fully participating in the decision making process relating to the project activities together with the men and this is likely to give them confidence in extending the decision making sphere even away from the project. Joint decisions by both male and female is reported to be increasing in the private and social matters. In Kathar, the women formed their separate group and started social development activities in the village. The group of women tied a person on the tree for whole night because that person used to drink alcohol and beat his wife. After the punishment from the women group, that person has stopped
- q Women have learned to have control over the resources.
- q Women’s perception towards risk from disaster has changed towards the better

because of the project's disaster mitigation efforts as well as from the various training on disaster mitigation and group dynamics imparted to them by the project.

- q Women have become more optimistic about the development of the village as a result of project intervention.
- q The awareness level of women and their articulative capacity without inhibition has increased considerably due to training, exposure visits and regular participation in the meetings.