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IN BANGLADESH**

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GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE: VULNERABILITY OF RURAL POOR WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

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This study addresses the explicit vulnerability of rural poor women with respect to sexual violence during the flood of 2013 and 2014 in Sundarganj Upazila of Gaibandha district of Bangladesh. The study was carried out with 580 rural women from five different flood affected villages. Among the flood affected women, 81% of the age group 18-41 felt sexually insecure during the flood and post-flood rehabilitation. About 57% of the respondents experienced several types of sexual violence and at least 14% of them were raped or faced attempt to rape. The study found that the vulnerability was highly dependent on the socio-economic status of the women. Women from female headed households are more vulnerable than the male headed households.

Key words: gender, vulnerability, sexual violence, climate change

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is facing climate change reality. In recent times, the country has faced a growing number of gigantic disasters, together with destructive cyclones like Aila, Sidr and frequent floods. Low economic strength, inadequate infrastructure, low level of social development, lack of institutional capacity, and a higher dependency on the natural resource base make the country more vulnerable to climate stimuli, including both variability as well as extreme events (GoB 2009; Huq and Khan, 2006). The principal climatic hazards affecting Bangladesh – floods and cyclones – are likely to increase in frequency, intensity, duration, and extent (Cannon 2002; Huq and Khan, 2006; Oliver-Smith 2009). The northern part of Bangladesh is highly susceptible to natural disaster due to the existing high intensity of poverty and limited natural resource base. The study area is located in Gaibandha district one of the most disaster prone northern districts of Bangladesh. Geographically this district is located at the confluence of the mighty rivers: Tista and Brahmaputra. This geographical position makes the major area of Gaibandha open to flood and river bank erosion. Repetitive floods and river bank erosion increase the vulnerability of the natural resource bases of the area and affect the livelihood of the communities. These vulnerabilities have different dimensions according to the household structure, income, gender, race and social position. There is a growing contentious regarding the gender specific vulnerabilities during the disaster and aftermaths (Warner 2010; Webersik 2010). In 2004, the post Tsunami violence against women in the affected areas is critically experienced the grievous discrimination against women in disaster (elten-Biermann 2006; Hines 2007; Fisher 2010). In a meeting of United Nations Commission for the Status of Women at New York in 2008, it has been attributed the gender and climate change as one of the critical emerging issues for women across the globe (Alston 2010). After that meeting a number of researches have been conducted to find out the underpinnings of the disaster triggered violence against women. In Bangladesh research addressing this issue is almost absent. Most of the research has been addressed the scale of vulnerability in terms of food security and social insecurity. This research in an attempt to unveil the gender dimension of vulnerability of poor rural women in a disaster affected situation.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in five different villages of Haripur and Kapasia Union of Sundarganj Upazila of Gaibandha district in Bangladesh. Two separate surveys were carried out after the devastating flood of the year 2013 and 2014. A total of 580 respondents of age 10 years to 65 years were selected randomly in various flood camps and temporary shelters. Various informal discussion and communication has been done to collect authentic data. The computer software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used to analyze the data. Pearson product moment Correlation coefficient was estimated in this study to describe the relationships of the variables.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal an association between the disaster and sexual violence against the women in rural Bangladesh (Table 1). The result shows that almost 73% (423 out of 580) respondents felt sexually insecure; 57% (331 out of 580) faced various types of sexual violence and almost 14% (81 out of 580) were raped or faced an attempt to be raped during the floods. It also revealed that women from the age group of 18 to 41 are the most significantly vulnerable. Almost 81% (343 out of 455) respondents of that age group felt sexually insecure during the flood and aftermath, especially during the stay at camps or temporary shelter.

Table 1. Insecurity and sexual violence against the women of male headed household (MHH) and in female headed household (FHH) in the survey area

Age Group	Male Headed Household (MHH)				Female Headed Household (FHH)				RN (b+f)	FI (c+g)	FV (d+h)	RAR (e+i)
	RN	FI	FV	RAR	RN	FI	FV	RAR				
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
10 to 17	13	10	8	1	8	8	8	4	21	18	16	5
18 to 25	73	55	41	3	41	38	36	8	114	93	77	11
26 to 33	154	96	64	9	102	102	97	39	256	198	161	48
34 to 41	49	17	4	1	36	35	23	13	85	52	27	14
42 to 49	21	3	0	0	33	21	19	2	54	24	19	2
50 to 57	17	11	3	0	16	16	19	1	33	27	22	1
58 to 65	5	0	0	0	12	11	9	0	17	11	9	0
Total	332	192	120	14	248	231	211	67	580	423	331	81

RN= Respondent Number; FI= Felt Insecure; FV= Faced Violence; RAR= Raped or Attempted to be Raped

The result further shows that there is a relationship between the house hold head and the level of insecurity. Cases are worsening for the member of the female headed household. About 95% (231 out of 241) of the respondents from female headed household (FHH) felt sexually insecure during the floods. On the other hand, for male headed household (MHH) this number is relatively small, which is 58% (192 out of 332). Figure 1 and Figure 2 shows the level of insecurity and violence in MHH and FHH respectively.

It is observed that, women of FHH are more insecure and faced more violence than the women of MHH. Pearson correlation coefficient shows significant positive relationship ($r=0.993$) at 1% level of significance (2-tailed) between MHH and FIMHH (feeling insecure from male headed household) in Table 2. Similarly it also shows significant positive relationship ($r=0.998$) at 1% level of significance between FHH and FIFHH (feeling insecure from female headed household) in Table 2. It further shows significant positive relationship at 1% level of significance between MHH, FHH and FITOTAL (Total number of feeling insecure); MHH, FHH and FV (Face violence) and finally MHH, FHH and RAR (Raped or attempted to be raped) in Table 2.

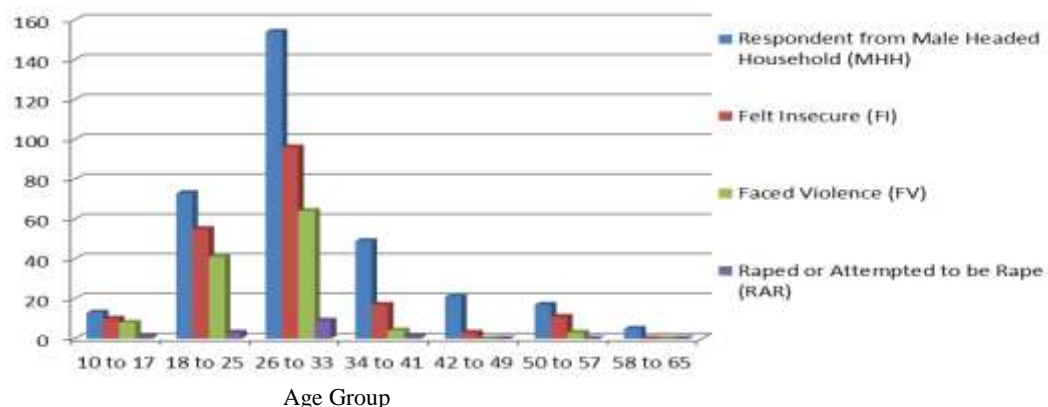


Fig. 1. Level of insecurity and violence in MHH

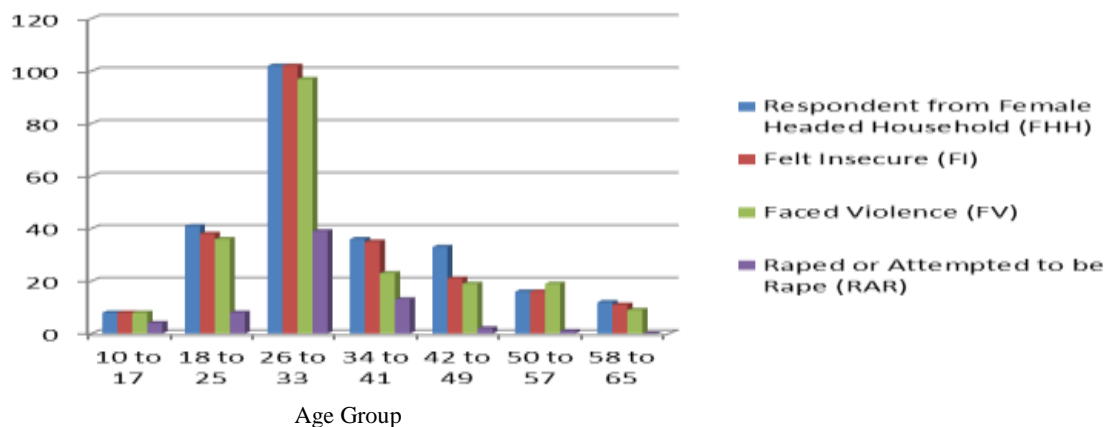


Fig. 2. Level of insecurity and violence in FHH

Table 2. Correlations of MHH and FHH with FIMHH, FIFHH, FITOTAL, FV and RAR

Variables	FIMHH	FIFHH	FITOTAL	FV	RAR
MHH	0.993**	-	0.999**	0.997**	0.986**
FHH	-	0.998**	0.992**	0.988**	0.973**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Here, MHH= Male Headed Household; FHH= Female Headed Household; FIMHH= Feeling Insecure from Male Headed Household; FIFHH= Feeling Insecure from Female Headed Household; FITOTAL= Total Number of Feeling Insecure; FV= Faced Violence; RAR= Raped or Attempted to be Raped

It is also found that, the sexual violence was positively related to the severity of the flood. Data collected from District Relief and Rehabilitation Office, Gaibandha revealed that, on the basis of D-form (Damage form) the flood of 2014 was more devastating than that of 2013. The number and frequency of sexual violence incidents were higher in 2014 when the flood was comparatively more severe (in respect of inundated areas, damage and rehabilitation costs) than those of 2013. Taken the study results together, it demonstrates that the sexual vulnerability is the socially built gender specific vulnerability of women during natural disasters.

DISCUSSION

Natural disaster affects human life and wellbeing. However the social structure, cultures and religion make gender biasness to lead unequal impacts on men and women (Hines 2007). Normally, women are more responsible to look after the family members especially kids. These sorts of activities and other division of labor make women more vulnerable to disaster. According to Hines (2007) the social and economic break down that follow natural disasters usually make women more vulnerable to sexual abuse and domestic violence. Lack of security and privacy in the camp or temporary shelter further enhance the sexual vulnerability for the women. The unique needs, like sanitary napkin, of females are always unaddressed in the policy and action of relief efforts. Again the reliefs materials are controlled and distributed by the men, women feel shy and uncomfortable to receive those (Lin and Ramdas, 2005). Thus social structure, power relation and economic conditions determine the level and severity of the violence against women. Widows, single or disabled women, women with low income, and those belonging to marginalized racial or cultural groups are particularly vulnerable (Enarson 2000). According to Fisher (2010) the deep rooted causes of such sexual vulnerability is embedded in the social and political discrepancy. Societal norms and male dominance in every aspect of family life makes the women voiceless. This voiceless condition triggers the male counterparts to exploit and abuse the women. The current effects of climate change is boosting the situations as more frequent natural disaster more violence against women. Huge number of rape, gang rape, molestation, abuse was reported after the Tsunami in 2004. The findings of this research also agreed with the cases of Tsunami victims. Fisher (2010) explains the violence as an embedded crime of society in normal time which triggered by the onset of natural disaster. Global responsibility should be fixed up to judge the climate change victims who are not the contributor of global climate change.

Violence against women during and after the disaster is reported globally. The findings of this study are highly aligned with the global literature of same nature. Fisher (2010) reported the massive violence including rape in Sri Lanka after the devastating tsunami. Similar result also found and described by elten-Biermann (2006) and Hines (2007) in tsunami affected areas. In Bangladesh the social structure and social position of the women keeps them silent and it is very hard to get the information regarding the sexual harassment. When any violence occurs against of a woman it is likely to blame the particular woman not the social circumstances and the existing situations. In these situations this study is carried out to reveal the extreme sexual vulnerability of poor women in rural Bangladesh. The result shows higher level of sexual insecurity among the rural poor women during the flood and aftermath, especially during the stay at camps or temporary shelter. Among the women members from female headed households are more vulnerable. Another complication is the social position and economic background. Poorer and voice less groups are mostly affected. A substantial number of the respondents (57%) have reported to have experienced various sorts of sexual harassment like teasing, bullying and different sort of indecent body language. Some respondent were taken extra care about sleeping at night and tried to move in a group rather than isolated. Rape and attempt to rape were the most serious consequence of sexual harassment. A moderately fair number (14%) of the respondents have been raped or faced attempt to rape. Most of the rape cases are happened in night and majority are of from either ultra-poor households or female headed household or both. The victims are afraid of social and religious norms and keep the violence in secrete. Some of them are reported that the rapist belongs to the influential community and exposure of them will bring more misery to the victim's life. Sexual violence added with the distress effects of the natural disaster miserably affects the psychology of the victimized women. In Bangladesh virginity of women is seems to be the most valuable wealth of women dignity. Loss of virginity before marriage affects both psychologically as well as socially. A raped woman has no position in the society even the closest relatives are hardly behave positively. Thus those women are paying off their safety and security off due to the cost of climate change for which they are not responsible.

CONCLUSION

Gender dimension of disaster is now a reality. Combined with chronic poverty, social anomaly and male dominance, the situations become worsen. Economic and social deprivation, sexual harassment, food insecurity together natural disaster despondently affects the psychology of the victimized women. The pattern and severity of natural disasters in Bangladesh has been changed and it is more frequent in recent years. The rural poor women in Bangladesh are paying with their normal life security due to the consequences of global climate change for which they are hardly responsible. The result of this research demands high level of local and global attention to the gendered dimension of natural disaster. Social structure and norms should be more fervent to address the proper right and attitudes towards the women. Proper global responsibility and policy initiatives are urgently required.

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