

# FLOODS: HAVOC FOR WOMEN

## (A CASE STUDY IN KASHMIR VALLEY)

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**Abstract:** The state of J&K which is prone to disasters and recently has suffered severely because of flash floods. People lose lives, families, loved ones, source of livelihood and above hope and desire to live. Most crucially women as mothers, wives and as the health and child care providers within the family are under immense psychological stress as a result of whole range of flood related fears, Further some women and girls do in fact need to take on new or additional responsibilities which often in themselves carry perceived risks. Women suffer the most during any disaster yet they are never included in any process of disaster preparedness. Floods destroy the household resources undermining the economic wellbeing of rural women. Researchers and authorities in charge of rehabilitation have not paid enough attention to the uneven impact of flood disaster on gender groups. Women are rarely involved in decision making process regarding disaster response. The lack of participation of women in particular and the local community in general in planning and execution of counter disaster plans ensure that such issues are not noticed. Various NGO's working in the area have closer ties with the local community and a better understanding of the linkage between rehabilitation and development. However because of the limited scope the operations and constraints of resources the influence of these NGO'S are not sustainable. Thus, the rural women cope on their own.

**Keywords:** floods, Women, health, family, responsibilities, NGO's.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In plain English, a flood is an excess of water or mud on land that is normally dry. A flood is a condition that occurs when water overflows the artificial or natural boundaries of a stream, river, or other body of water onto normally dry land.

Floods occur most commonly when water from heavy rainfall, from melting ice and snow, or from a combination of these exceeds the carrying capacity of the river system, lake, or the like into which it runs. Usually the combined flow of several water-swollen tributaries causes flooding along a river bank or shoreline. Accounts of floods that destroyed nearly all life are found in the mythology of many peoples. Not all floods are destructive, however the annual floodwaters of the Nile and some other larger rivers historically deposited fertile soil along the surrounding flood plain, which is used extensively for agriculture. The damming of the Nile and other rivers in modern times, however, often has greatly reduced this deposition.

Floods are the most frequent type of disaster worldwide. It can strike anywhere and anytime. Although floods can be predicted, they often cause massive damage and destruction of property as most urban communities are located near water sources such as coasts and rivers.

As defined by the National Flood Insurance Program, a flood is:

“A general and temporary condition of partial or complete inundation of two or more acres of normally dry land area or of two or more properties (at least one of which is your property) from:

- Overflow of inland or tidal waters,
- Unusual and rapid accumulation or runoff of surface waters from any source, or
- A mudflow.



**Photograph 1: flood affected people in Kashmir valley**

The collapse or subsidence of land along the shore of a lake or similar body of water as a result of erosion or undermining caused by waves or currents of water exceeding anticipated cyclical levels that result in a flood.”

Floods can be slow, or fast rising but generally develop over a period of days. Mitigation includes any activities that prevent an emergency, reduce the chance of an emergency happening, or lessen the damaging effects of unavoidable emergencies.

Severe floods not only ruin homes / businesses and destroy personal property, but the water left behind causes further damage to property and contents. The environment and wildlife is also at risk when damage when damage to businesses causes the accidental release of toxic materials like paints, pesticides, gasoline etc. Floodwater can severely disrupt public and personal transport by cutting off roads and railway lines, as well as communication links when telephone lines are damaged. Unfortunately, flooding not only disrupts many people’s lives each year, but it frequently creates personal tragedies when people are swept away and drowned.

Flooding of areas used for socio-economic activities produces a variety of negative impacts. The magnitude of adverse impacts depends on the vulnerability of the activities and population and the frequency, intensity and extent of flooding. Some of these factors are, Loss of lives and property, Loss of livelihoods, Decreased purchasing and production power, Mass migration, psychosocial effects, Hindering economic growth and development, Political implications.

## II. THE MONSOONS

Monsoon season is a welcome relief to drought conditions in many areas of the world. Monsoons can also bring about widespread famine and enough rain to kill hundreds of people in floods. While the Asia and India monsoons are famous,

The most famous monsoon is the Indian monsoon. The intense rainfall in these regions can cause massive flooding and destruction of crops. In dry climates, monsoons are an important replenishment for life as water is brought back into drought-stricken zones of the world. Part of the reason India gets such an intense monsoon season is due to its elevation. The higher the land mass, the higher the likelihood of the development of a low pressure zone. The Tibetan Plateau to the north of India is one of the largest and highest plateaus on Earth.

Monsoon seasons can actually fail bringing intense drought and famines to many parts of the world.

Monsoons affect communities in many different ways. They can both benefit communities and put them in danger. The benefits of monsoon rain are immense - they provide water for a country whose dry, arid climate destroys and dries out the water supply. In the hotter and drier months of the year in India, people are sometimes forced to travel by foot for miles just to get clean water for their families. Some just collapse from heat stroke and lack of energy. The monsoons change this - the water from the monsoon rain saves lives. But, in spite of all of the benefits, the monsoons can put communities in danger. The winds can knock down trees and even do some damage to people's houses or buildings - windows may be broken and trees may fall on houses.

The floods also cause people serious problems. People may be walking down the street, wading through waist-deep water. The floods from the extreme rain can spread bacteria as well. The dirty water that hundreds of other people have been wading through can be a good breeding ground for harmful bacteria and it helps spread deadly diseases. Mosquitoes breed in water, so there might be an over-population of mosquitoes that can carry diseases, as well. Despite the dangers that monsoons bring, they can still provide clean drinking water. With all of the benefits that they bring to India, they still have disadvantages - but the monsoon is actually looked forward to in Indian communities. All the good that the monsoons do for them has caused the people of India to create holidays, festivals and other celebrations to welcome the monsoon season.

The seasonal changes in weather are so important to the people of India, the agriculture and the animals, that their lives depend on monsoons. Although monsoons are generally the most severe in India, there are still many other places in the world that experience the pouring rain and the damaging winds of monsoons - mostly countries in southern Asia, like India.

Anxiety over delayed monsoons is nothing new. This anxiety is like the rains themselves: a staple of Indian life. The monsoon isn't just the key climatic or agricultural event in the Indian subcontinent — it's the key economic event. Its effects reach far beyond agricultural output, shaping political dynamics on both the regional and national levels.

A special feature in India is that we have heavy rainfall during monsoons. There are other weather systems also that bring in a lot of rain. Storm surges can also affect coastal cities/towns. Sudden release or failure to release water from dams can also have severe impact. In addition, the urban heat island effect has resulted in an increase in rainfall over urban areas. Global climate change is resulting in changed weather patterns and increased episodes of high intensity rainfall events occurring in shorter periods of time. Then the threat of sea-level rise is also looming large, threatening all the coastal cities. Cities/towns located on the coast, on river banks, upstream/ downstream of dams, inland cities and in hilly areas can all be affected. Flooding is by setting up a vulnerability-based geospatial framework to generate and analyse different scenarios. This will help in identifying and planning for the most effective/ appropriate actions in a dynamic way to incorporate day-to-day changes that take place in urban areas, having the potential to alter the prevailing vulnerability profile.

This paper is limited to gender issue and its concerns which should evoke a response. This shall surely find its way in future planning and implementation of disaster management and response.



**Photograph 2: Rescue operations in flood affected areas in Kashmir valley**

### **Urban Flood Risk in India:**

There has been an increasing trend of urban flood disasters in India over the past several years whereby major cities in India have been severely affected. The most notable amongst them are Hyderabad in 2000, Ahmedabad in 2001, Delhi in 2002 and 2003, Chennai in 2004, Mumbai in 2005, Surat in 2006, Kolkata in 2007, Jamshedpur in 2008, Delhi in 2009 and Guwahati, Delhi in 2010 and now Srinagar in 2014.



**Region is highly prone to the impacts of natural disasters:**

Situated in the lap of Mighty Himalayas with Pir Panchal Range on one end while as the Zaskar Range on the other end the valley is a bowl shaped plain with River Jhelum meandering through it fed by perinneal streams and nullahs , the region is regularly hit by , earthquakes, floods, landslides, cloudbursts and avalanches , etc. Natural disasters can have major impacts on the social and economic welfare of a population, and often pose serious obstacles in the achievement of sustainable social and economic development. Moreover, impacts from disasters are not uniformly distributed within a population and tend to disproportionately affect the poorest and most marginalized groups.

Therefore it is no longer a once in a blue moon formulae but a recurring phenomenon and mere guidelines, handbooks and meetings of minds to plan would no longer suffice, but actual materialization and action on the ground with sufficient preparation is required to be undertaken at the ground level. However before we dwell on the disaster preparedness and management, a peek into the backdrop of women's position in earlier times might also provide an insight into the kind of training required for disaster preparedness.

**WOMEN RIGHTS IN VEDAS**

- > Women should be Valiant. [ Yajur Veda 10.03 ]
- > Women should earn Fame. [ Atharva Veda 14.1.20 ]
- > Women should be Scholars. [ Atharva Veda 11.5.18 ]
- > Women should be Illuminating. [ Atharva Veda 14.2.74 ]
- > Women should be Prosperous and Wealth. [ Atharva Veda 7.47.2 ]
- > Women should be Intelligent and Knowledgeable. [ Atharva Veda 7.47.1 ]
- > Women should take part in the Legislative Chambers. [ Atharva Veda 7.38.4 ]
- > Women should be given the lead stage for Ruling nation. [ RV 10.85.46 ]
- > Women should be given the lead stage in Society Works. [ RV 10.85.46 ]
- > Women should be given the lead stage in Governmental Organizations. [ RV 10.85.46 ]
- > Women should have same right as Son over Father's Property. [ RV 3.31.1 ]
- > Women should be protector of Family & Society. [ Atharva Veda 14.1.20 ]
- > Women should be provider of Wealth, Food [ Atharva Veda 11.1.17 ]
- > Women should be provider of Prosperity. [ Atharva Veda 11.1.17 ]
- > Women should ride on Chariots. [ Atharva Veda 9.9.2 ]
- > Women should participate in War. [ Yajur Veda 16.44 ]

Such were the rights and status of women in Vedic era. Now in 2014 when we are no less a power the rights of women still remain by and large on the papers than actually on ground. Vast Majority of population who are in control of business have typical medieval patriarchal mindsets and have the bohemian concept of role of women in society. The Victorian morality still persists where women were part of the property of a man, therefore the fact remains that even the most modern self acclaimed, liberated women do have to relate themselves either with the father, brother, husband or son to command any kind of decision making process in the house hold, and outside as well either it has to be a male patron or mentor who will backup the decision making process of the female. Having observed that, it is quite clear so far that despite all the liberty and freedom at the disposal of the female, women are still the most vulnerable kinds who are to be given their due in the decision making process.

**III. HOW DISASTERS AFFECT WOMEN****A few instances to ponder upon:**

1. Commissioner Secretary ( a lady) in J&K Govt. is stuck in the attic of her house at Rajbagh locality her three storeyed house submerged in 25 feet of water is rescued after six days, that too when her son arrived from Delhi, arranged a boat for her rescue. Her SOS calls to the colleagues in government bore no fruits as soon the telephone network was dead.

2. A lady who was sick and ailing was hauled up again in attic for 11 days as she was unable to walk and was bedridden, rescued from the attic along with her daughter by the rescue teams after the heard cries of the daughter. They had no food to eat no water to drink and no other life support system.
3. A pregnant lady was rescued by six army personnel who were part of the rescue operations from Dalgate (water level 10-12 feet) on sixth day and she was already in labour, her waters had broken, when the Subedar ordered his jawans to operate upon her and in the boat with the help of Jawans the lady delivered a baby.
4. In another similar rescue operation of a pregnant lady, at Bemina. She was rescued with the help of a chopper, but the lady was to be tied up together hugging the Jawan who had gone down with the cable to lift her.
5. In relief camps where children and females who were rescued as priority in the rescue and were separated by their male members, had no clue about the rest of the families for next one week till some one communicated them as here was no communication network.
6. The women and children who were shifted to relief camps from various points, by the bystanders and onlookers, for their food and shelter they were dependant totally on stranger populations, and in one of the relief camps at Bemina, a female was molested in an attempt to rape, but for the hue and cry that people caught hold of the fellow and thrashed him.
7. There were no or insufficient toilet facilities even till date especially for those females who are still living in tents. A seven men tent occupied by two sons, their wives, children, parents and a sister and a brother, on the banks of river Jhelum as their three storeyed house collapsed after the floods receded as water inundated the house for 15 days.
8. Relief distribution being dominated by males, and chaotic struggle to seek the same, women were either marginalised or absolutely neglected in relief distribution with might is right prevailing on streets.
9. Only one NGO which was being headed by a lady could requisition and distribute '*Female Hygiene Kits*' comprising of sanitary napkins, tissue papers, soap, toothbrush, paste and comb and a pair of undergarments. In a city which was submerged in 10-25 feet of flood water, with no supplies and communication and people marooned on the third/fourth floors of their houses, one could imagine the plight of females especially those who must be undergoing their periods and the level of hygiene required to be maintained in normal course.
10. Women wearing jewellery or carrying jewellery also carry a potential threat/ risk at the hands of unscrupulous elements who can take a chance at such chaotic times when usual law and order machinery is engaged in rescue operations.

These are only illustrative examples to give you an idea as to what actually happened in those days of floods.<sup>1</sup>

Women and children are particularly affected by disasters, accounting for more than 75% of displaced persons. In addition to the immediate effects of a natural disaster, women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems, as well as increased rates of sexual and domestic violence. Moreover, established gender roles often dictate that women become the primary caretakers for those affected by disasters – including children, the injured and sick, and the elderly – which substantially increases their workload and emotional burden. A woman's pre-disaster familial responsibilities are magnified and expanded by the onset of a disaster or emergency, with significantly less support and resources. Women play a central role within the family, securing relief from assistance providers, meeting the immediate survival needs of family members and managing temporary relocation. Gender inequality in social, economic and political spheres results in sometimes vast differences between men and women in emergency communication; household decisions about use of relief assets; voluntary relief and recovery work; access to evacuation shelter and relief goods; and employment in disaster planning, relief and recovery programs, among others. Examining relief activities through a gender lens is therefore critical to delivering the most effective and well-rounded humanitarian response possible.

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<sup>1</sup> M.A. Alnasir, a relief worker with Sajid Iqbal Foundation for Peace and Human Rights & Conflict Management. An eyewitness account from the flooded city and relief aid worker in Srinagar City during floods & post floods.

### Gender and health in disasters:

In disaster situations, women and men, boys and girls are affected differently. Available data suggest that there is a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process: exposure to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical impact, psychological impact, recovery and reconstruction.

Due to social norms and their interaction with biological factors, women and children-particularly girls- may face increased risk to adverse health effects and violence. They may be unable to access assistance safely and/or to make their needs known. Additionally, women are insufficiently included in community consultation and decision-making processes, resulting in their needs not being met.

WHO is committed to ensuring that gender considerations are adequately addressed in all of its relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities. In a nation considered the most vulnerable to natural disasters in the world, women must be enabled to take on a bigger role in disaster preparedness and response, experts say. *“To be frank, it’s a constant challenge to achieve genuine female participation in the various activities... While I’ve observed a real commitment to ensuring female representation in disaster preparedness, planning and response, actual participation is something else,”*<sup>2</sup> “After a disaster, women undertake tasks directly related to survival. Once all family members are accounted for, women clean up the kitchen, and establish access to water, dry clothing and a place to sleep. Women will travel long distances and risk their own lives to get water for their families,” This is despite the fact that government and NGOs began placing stronger emphasis on gender studies in relation to natural disasters following the 1991 cyclone, which resulted in widespread flooding and some 140,000 dead. Research indicates that women are the most vulnerable section of the population in Bangladesh, where 171 disasters between 1971 and 2005 resulted in the loss of more than half a million lives. Evidence of women and girls from all walks of life who are making a difference continues to emerge. This is just one reference. Women are leading efforts in many communities across the globe. Though seldom recognized, their work saves lives, communities, and families. Mariam Bibi, a mother of four in a remote village of Badin district, Sindh province in Pakistan, is another example, who, with a small support of UNFAO-supplied sunflower seed and fertilizer, could not only restore her 2010 and 2011 flood-devastated livelihoods, but could also come to the podium in front of mostly men saying that women are not only meant to work inside their houses, but if given an opportunity, they can shape up their lives and livelihoods on their own. Women in rural Nepal are no less. They’ve always stood at the forefront to rebuild their lives whenever hit by a disaster, more sturdily than men sometimes.

In the end, like Hillary Clinton mentioned in the third annual Women in the World Summit held in New York in March 2012, “What does it mean to be a woman in the world? It means never giving up. It means getting up, working hard, and putting a country or a community on your back.



**Photograph 3: Flood affected areas in Kashmir valley**

<sup>2</sup> Steven Goldfinch, programme specialist in disaster management for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), told IRIN DHAKA, 20 July 2011.

The UN Environment Programme reports that in 1991, among women aged 20-44, the death rate was 71 per 1,000 compared to 15 per thousand for men. It attributed the disparity to the social expectation that women wait for family members before escaping to a safer place. "I do not believe the knowledge we have gained has been factored into disaster response adequately. There are good practices here and there, but it's not main stream. And as disaster response is still male-dominated, women are rarely mentioned in national documents,"<sup>3</sup>

#### **Clothing:**

Particularly in regions where women maintain a standard of modesty for cultural or religious reasons, such as covering their heads, providing appropriate attire that will allow them to function comfortably within their community is critical. Ensuring women have the clothes they deem appropriate will allow them to travel in public to collect aid supplies, care for their children, and participate fully in other aspects of the recovery process.

In the developing world, women widely continue to practice traditional roles as the primary family and home caretaker. Many women do not earn a wage, and those who do earn significantly less than their male counterparts. It is estimated that women perform 70% of all unpaid work in the developing world. The majority of the world's small scale farmers are women, and given their traditional roles, women in developing nations are also often the primary natural resource users (gathering firewood, collecting water). Their dependence on the land coupled with their typically unpaid labour makes them especially vulnerable to any changes in their environment. Ultimately, the impact of any change in the environment will be most greatly felt by those who have

#### **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV):**

While Sexual and Gender-Based Violence continues to be prevalent in day-to-day life throughout the world, in emergencies, social systems and norms of behaviour are often weakened or broken down, thus increasing its likelihood of incidence. Separation from family during an emergency makes women and girls especially vulnerable to abuse because of their gender, age or reliance on others for assistance or safe passage. While women and girls are the primary targets of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, it should be noted that young boys and men may also be the victims of such abuse.

Humanitarian programs addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence includes both reactive and preventative components -- implementing measures to keep women safe in wake of an humanitarian crisis, and at once providing services to support victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence with healthcare, psychological support and other types of assistance.

#### **There are costs in ignoring gender aspects in disaster recovery and risk management strategies.**

Failure to consider gender in Disaster Risk Management programs is likely to lead to overlooking the full range of damages and needs, which can hinder reconstruction, recovery and long-term development of countries that repeatedly suffer from disaster impacts, and also make Disaster Risk Management effort less effective. Research indicates that a gender-blind response to natural disasters can reinforce, perpetuate and increase existing gender inequality, making bad situations worse for women. Some of the key findings from the field work include:

- Women face entrenched societal barriers to participation.
- While the regulatory and policy framework for gender equality is growing stronger, significant gaps between law and practice remain.
- Disaster Risk Management programs suffer from ad hoc integration of gender.
- Difficulties in incorporating gender concerns during actual implementation of program activities.

### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Women can make a difference in disaster risk management (DRM) efforts through participation and empowerment in the planning, decision-making and implementation processes.**

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<sup>3</sup>. Khurshid Alam, a climate change and natural disaster expert and one of the study's authors.



There are many actions that can be taken to mainstream Gender issues into Disaster Risk Management. These include for example:

- Ensure both men and women are involved in Disaster Risk Management planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.
- For Disaster Risk Management consultation and planning exercises, organize separate consultations with women and men, at convenient times for women and men.
- Facilitate change by improving information, awareness and participation. Identify a gender champion and train more women leaders to institutionalize gender-equal project planning, implementation and monitoring initiatives.
- Develop and implement a gender strategy and action plan for the project with indicators and monitoring tools.
- Make collection of sex-disaggregated data a requirement at the policy level and ensure sex-disaggregated data are collected both in the pre- and post-disaster situation. Include women's groups, if they exist, and women in communities in data collection and data analysis.
- Work closely with the government, other stakeholders and development partners to be inclusive in their approach to recovery and reconstruction.
- Ensure part of the trained females especially in the forces and NDRF on the ready and engage them in rescue operations.
- College students and university students especially female students, must be trained for such calamities and a regular volunteer force be developed to assist civil/ military administration at such times with standing instructions for all such volunteers to automatically join the nearest available centre for help and assistance.
- Need to conduct mock drills and keep [female] volunteers in a state of preparedness for such disasters.

Facilitate the economic recovery of men and women. Identify gender specific recovery needs, especially with respect to housing, land / property rights; and physical / mental health, and engage women in all recovery activities.

Though there are many dimensions to the magnitude of disaster and the calamity that unfolded on Sept 06 Midnight with 10-35 feet of water inundating people's houses within 15 minutes time and providing no time for response, and one major dimension being urban planning and drainage.

## V. CONCLUSION

Monsoons affect communities in many different ways. They can both benefit communities as well as put them in danger. Like floods also cause people serious problems as we have discussed above. Thus, women must be enabled to take on a bigger role in disaster preparedness and response, even WHO experts Support that.

This is a recurring phenomenon and mere guidelines, handbooks and meetings of minds to plan would no longer suffice, but actual materialization and action on the ground with sufficient preparation is required to be undertaken at the ground level.

Humanitarian programs addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence that include both reactive and preventative components -- implementing measures to keep women safe in wake of an humanitarian crisis, and at once providing services to support victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence with healthcare, psychological support and other types of assistance should be encouraged especially in light of the recent flood situation in the Kashmir valley during September 2014. We must not let the situations like this reoccur ever anywhere.