

## Women most at risk in Bangladesh disasters

by Georgina Cooper

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Noorjahan Begam, 51, lives in southern Bangladesh and has first hand experience of the impact cyclones have on communities. She lost her husband, Abul Hossain, in a cyclone in August 2006. A fisherman, he had left home as usual to go to sea but never returned.

Horrifically, that wasn't Noorjahan's only experience of losing a loved one in a cyclone. In a 1970 cyclone, before the radio early warning system that now exists was available, her three sisters and 22 members of her extended family were killed.

"It was a bitter experience for me and now I am left alone," she said.

I met Noorjahan at the Khajuna cyclone shelter in southern Bangladesh and her story was a stark reminder of just how important it is for communities to prepare for disasters to avoid future tragedies.

It is no coincidence that it was her sisters who died in the cyclone. Women and children are most at risk.

Women are severely marginalised all over Bangladesh, but the problem is magnified in coastal areas where life is more conservative and women are fairly house-bound and don't mix with men outside the family. Men are the heads of the families and take responsibility in community matters but this leaves women disempowered and extremely vulnerable.

Fargana Jahan, 35, from Potuakhali district, said things were slowly improving.

"Men used to disseminate information on preparing for disasters but did not share it with women. They thought that the women didn't need the information on preparing for cyclones."

That was an issue I was really keen to hear about - I wanted to speak to women who have to live with this "tradition" hanging over them.

Women usually have to get their husband's approval to leave the home and there are stories of women staying indoors even as a cyclone approached simply because their husbands were not around to grant permission. Rather than fleeing to the nearest shelter, the women feared they would be blamed if their home was looted.

What astonished me was that cultural practices like these lead to a whole section of society being forgotten - particularly worrying against the backdrop of global warming. Cyclones are already common and earlier this year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted that tropical cyclones are likely to become more frequent as climate change accelerates.

In Bangladesh, with a population of around 142 million, there is not much of a buffer zone for people to retreat to when disasters strike. Residents are no strangers to disasters but things can certainly get worse.

The British, Swedish and German Red Cross societies are working closely with the Bangladesh Red Crescent on a project, set up with funding from the European Commission, to build awareness within the community on how to prepare for disasters in the coastal cyclone-prone areas of southern Bangladesh.

The project has only been running for a year and despite its rather long and complex name -Building Community Disaster Preparedness Capacity Project – it is a pretty simple concept. To save themselves and their livelihoods, people need simple and practical tips on how to cope when a cyclone hits, and it is the communities who need to spread this information themselves.

The project is reaching out to around 206,000 people living close to 84 shelters through volunteer units connected to each shelter.

The focus is to encourage female volunteers to spread the messages to other women and to children. It is also aimed at educating men in the importance of the project.

Noorjahan is old, and with such a haunting story it is understandable that she is keen for other women to grasp opportunities she has not had. She said she is eager for women to be in a better position to tell others about the dangers of cyclones and has already learnt tips from the volunteers to help her survive.

But it's not always easy to break with tradition. I met one woman, a 42-year-old volunteer with the project called Mrs Rani, who was lucky to have a supportive husband but on returning from her month-long volunteer training was ostracised by the community.

"When I returned, neighbours and people in the community told me I had become a prostitute because I was staying away from my home and meeting with other men."

But now Mrs Rani is one of a growing body of female volunteers who are spreading life-saving information - such as ensuring they know the early warning signals and have dry food to take to a cyclone shelter.

There are even seemingly small lessons such as encouraging women to change out of the traditional sari into trousers and a long shirt, and tying their hair back - to help prevent drowning should they be caught in the flooding that comes with a cyclone.

As more women are given the chance to get these life-saving messages and are prepare for disasters, there will hopefully be fewer tragic stories like that of Noorjahan's family.

<http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/26401/2007/06/27-104321-1.htm>