

Gender-Based Violence and Women's Vulnerability in Post-Climate Disaster Bangladesh: A Qualitative Analysis of Safety, and Protection Challenges

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Abstract

Climate-related disasters in Bangladesh worsen existing socioeconomic and gender inequalities, particularly for women and girls in relief camps who face heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV). This study aims to examine the vulnerability of women in Bangladesh in the context of climate-induced disasters within camp and shelter environments, employing a qualitative secondary data approach drawn from academic articles, research reports, and relevant policy documents. Through critical review and thematic analysis, findings reveal that women in disaster-affected areas experience physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as privacy violations and health vulnerabilities — particularly in overcrowded and poorly resourced shelters. Perpetrators include intimate partners, strangers, and community members. Existing measures such as gender-segregated shelters and community-based protection mechanisms have proven insufficient to ensure adequate protection. The study concludes that climate-related disasters tend to deepen gender inequalities and increase women's vulnerability to GBV, highlighting the urgent need for holistic, gender-sensitive, and long-term interventions to strengthen protection, privacy, health services, and safety for women in post-disaster settings in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS

climate change; women's violence; gender vulnerability; adaptation; Bangladesh

Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the disaster-prone countries in the world, which is regularly affected by cyclones, floods, and riverbank erosion. These risks have been exacerbated by climate change, causing displacement, livelihood disruption and vulnerability of disadvantaged communities ([Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund \(BCCRF\), 2021](#)). The unequal gender situation can be worsened in disaster settings, especially during a disaster phase like shelter or relief camps, and may increase women's insecurity and risk of being exploited and suffering from gender-based violence (GBV). According to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, violence against women can be defined as acts of gender-based violence that cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including deprivation of liberty in public or private life ([Sujatha, 2014](#)).

GBV is strongly linked to gender inequality and socioeconomic and environmental insecurity on a global scale. Women face unequal risk of violence and

about one in three women in the world will face violence at some point in their lives (World Bank (WB), 2019). The risks of such disasters are exacerbated by the displacement, loss of livelihood, economic dependence, lack of privacy, and limited access to protection services and essential services during climate-related disasters (Molyneaux et al., 2020; World Health Organization (WHO), 2015). These are especially relevant in South Asia, where the consequences of climate change include food and water insecurity, displacement and health issues (McAdam & Saul, 2010). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), (2018) also makes clear the differential impacts of climate change on communities, such as flooding, shoreline erosion, disruption of food production systems, and water shortages, which increase social vulnerabilities and drive people to displacement.

Based on the evidence from Bangladesh, women who have been affected by floods and other disasters are socially, economically and gender specific vulnerable (Azad et al., 2014). Meanwhile, studies have shown the coping abilities and resilience of women in the event of disaster (Nasreen, 2012). Stress, disruption of livelihoods and loss of social support stemming from disasters can exacerbate women's vulnerabilities to violence, including domestic violence, as well (WHO, 2015; Molyneaux et al., 2019). Current evidence is, however, still scattered and only available for certain types of disasters and different components of vulnerability. While previous research has separately focused on displacement, livelihood insecurity, health risk, violence, and coping capacity of women, there is a lack of integration to provide a holistic understanding of GBV after climate related disaster in Bangladesh.

The specific research problem that was addressed in this study is this fragmentation. While women's vulnerabilities and violence have been reported in the context of disaster-related situations, there is little systematic synthesis of the different types of GBV, underlying women's vulnerability, protection issues, and the effectiveness and limitations of gender-responsive climate adaptation measures in Bangladesh. This study's novelty is that it has brought these scattered aspects together in a single systematic review on a specific population of women who are facing climate-related disasters in Bangladesh, in a specific context, the post-disaster shelter and relief environment. The review integrates the available evidence to highlight patterns of GBV and vulnerability, vulnerabilities which have not been addressed, and implications for more gender-responsive disaster-management and climate-adaptation policies based on the evidence.

This study seeks to clarify women's reported gender vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV) following climate-related disasters, as well as the social, economic, environmental, and institutional factors that increase women's vulnerability in post-disaster contexts, and create protection mechanisms and adaptation measures to climate-related disasters, including their key barriers and limitations.

Literature Review

The literature clearly shows that climate-related disasters can exacerbate gender disparities and heighten women's vulnerability to violence. Women are more likely to be at risk, as their access to resources, information, mobility and decision making is often unequal (McLeod et al., 2018). Further evidence from big disasters, such as the tsunami in 2004, the Bangladesh cyclone in 2007 and

Pakistan floods in 2010, also indicates that during extreme events women may be more vulnerable and more likely to die than men (Dasgupta et al., 2010). But the literature also suggests that there is not only a gender vulnerability factor. The effects of disaster are intertwined with gender and socio-economic status, access to resources, social position, and preparedness.

One thing that has been found in all the studies is the link between climate-related stress and increased violence towards women. Household economic insecurity and exposure to harassment and domestic violence have been seen to be linked with drought, flooding, displacement, livelihood disruption, and household economic insecurity (Westermann & Pretty, 2005). Studies in the context of floods in Bangladesh also indicate that during the floods, women are more vulnerable and face more harassment (Nasreen, 2012; Azad et al., 2014). The results point to a general pattern that environmental stress does not in itself lead to GBV, but can exacerbate social and economic stressors that enable GBV. However, depending on the context, the evidence suggests that the link between disasters and GBV is shaped by household conditions, gender norms, economic insecurity and access to social protection.

Another risk factor mentioned in the literature is displacement, as well as the disruption of social protection systems. During disasters, women and girls may be more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse because of family separation and a loss of community surveillance (Kolbe et al., 2010). Women's access to shelter, relief services, healthcare and other types of support can also be restricted due to limited mobility and gender norms in Bangladesh (Rashid & Michaud, 2000). There can be more risks in the coverage of temporary shelters lacking privacy, separate sanitation facility and hygiene measures (Nasreen 2010). Studies therefore converge on the importance of the shelter conditions, with relatively less focus on the interaction between the existing gender norms and the shelter conditions in relation to the GBV.

One of the other fundamental issues is the lack of recognition of psychological and emotional violence. Previous studies have focused on physical and sexual forms of abuse, leaving emotional and psychological abuse somewhat under-researched (Cerna-Turoff et al., 2019; Sriskandarajah et al., 2015). This neglect is important as psychological violence has the potential to create chronic trauma and mental health impacts (Madkour et al., 2011). Post-disaster increased domestic responsibilities due to task-related changes in household activities such as water collection and cooking, and feeding of household members can also negatively impact women and girls' physical and mental well-being and capacities (Rahman, 2013). The results expand the definition of GBV beyond sexual and/or physical abuse, and suggest the importance of examining the impact of less obvious forms of violence and their longer-term effects.

Another theme is the role of the norms and institutional responses. Cultural norms and gender inequality can perpetuate women's reliance and limit their access to protection and reporting (Masson et al., 2019). Similarly, Glemarec et al., (2016) claim that gender-specific vulnerabilities are often ignored in the context of disaster and relief interventions. The literature also underscores the coping abilities and resilience of women, and in this respect women should not only be seen as victims of disasters, but also as active participants in coping with them (Nasreen, 2012). This makes an analytical difference because disaster vulnerability can be seen as being a function of both

structural constraints and women's adaptive and response capabilities.

While there is significant evidence of gendered disaster vulnerability, there is still much that is not known. First, existing literature is fragmented across various types and forms of violence in the context of disaster, and Bangladesh specific patterns cannot be discerned easily. Second, physical and sexual violence are addressed more than emotional, psychological and longer-term experiences of GBV. Third, the linkages between climate-induced stress, gender norms, living conditions, and legal, health and social services continue to be insufficiently brought together. Lastly, while there are studies that have identified women's vulnerabilities, there are fewer studies that have critically reviewed the effectiveness and shortcomings of disaster-management and climate-adaptation policies that take gender into account. The gaps warrant a systematic review to bring together the existing literature and to explore GBV in Bangladesh from a more gender, social and institutional lens.

Justification of the Study

While there have been studies and reviews focused on climate vulnerability and disaster, and gender and disaster, there are limited data regarding gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of disasters that are climate-related in Bangladesh. To date, existing reviews have primarily focused on more general gender and climate vulnerability concerns, and have not always included or integrated GBV as a specific concern, contributing factors, shelter-related risks, protection gaps, and/or gender responsive adaptation measures. This systematic review is original because the dimensions were combined and synthesized in one review synthesis for Bangladesh. Through a synthesis of secondary evidence, the study pinpoints the major forms and drivers of GBV, protection issues, and policy gaps and draws implications for more gender-responsive disaster-management and climate-adaptation policies based on evidence.

Methods

The current study used a qualitative secondary data analysis approach to examine the links between climate change induced disaster and gender-based violence (GBV) and other vulnerabilities of women in Bangladesh. No primary data collected by surveys, interviews or fieldwork. Rather, the study used pertinent peer-reviewed articles, books, scholarly publications and institutional authoritative reports to draw together existing evidence. The keywords used to search and find relevant literature in Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, relevant academic journals and institutional websites were "climate change," "climate-related disasters," "gender-based violence," "violence against women," "women's vulnerability," "Bangladesh," "cyclone," "flood," "displacement," and "disaster response." The sources were purpose sampled, according to their importance to the research objective. The sources that were prioritised were those that (i) focused on Bangladesh or included Bangladesh; (ii) addressed climate change, disasters, displacement or climate-related vulnerabilities; (iii) examined women, gender, GBV, health, economic insecurity, education, shelter or sanitation; and (iv) were peer-reviewed scholarly publications or credible institutional reports. Excluded: Duplicate, irrelevant, insufficient documentation, and non-

evidence-based sources. All selected sources were critically reviewed and thematically analysed. Key thematic categories of relevant information included were: climate change and vulnerability of women; gender-based violence and vulnerabilities; shelter, safety and protection issues; protection and coping mechanisms. The wide variety of study designs and indicators, geographical setting, and reporting formats made it impossible to conduct a quantitative thematic and descriptive synthesis. The study analyzed the patterns, vulnerabilities, protection issues and gender specific vulnerabilities of women in the context of climate-related disasters in Bangladesh.

Result and Discussion

Climate Change and Women's Vulnerability in Bangladesh

From the reviewed evidence, it is found that unequal access to resources, limited mobility, less access to information and low participation in household and community decision-making are the main drivers which make women more vulnerable to climate related disasters in Bangladesh (Reggers, 2019). Structural disadvantages are accentuated by cultural, religious, socioeconomic and regional factors (Bhardwaj et al., 2015). Therefore, climate-related hazards may exacerbate gender inequalities but not impact women and men alike.

These inequalities can lead to increased risk to women of displacement, livelihood disruption, security issues and GBV in the context of in Bangladesh. Restricted resources and decision-making capacity may also hinder women's access to shelters, relief, health services, and other protection services. Socio-economic vulnerability is defined as the ability to anticipate, withstand and recover from climate-related hazards, as highlighted by Habib, (2021), which means that the vulnerability of women not only relates to exposure, but also to their capacity to respond and recover.

The findings thus indicate that structural gender inequalities are linked with the GBV risk. Programs on climate adaptation and disaster response need therefore to focus on women's access to resources, information, movement, decision making and protection services and not just on women as a vulnerable group. This offers a concrete foundation for incorporating gender-sensitive decisions into Bangladesh's climate adaptation and disaster-management policies.

Forms of GBV and Related Vulnerabilities in Post-Disaster Settings

The evidence reviewed shows that there are several related types of violence and vulnerability faced by women and girls in affected and shelter contexts in Bangladesh.

1. Privacy and safety issues: The lack of privacy and gender inappropriate shelter facilities are major safety concerns for women and girls. The route to fetch water can come with physical risks for women and girls and the lack of separating toilets, bathing and living places can make people feel unsafe. Based on the evidence gathered from the shelter context, it is observed that around 93% of the respondents have found emergency or transitional shelters not to be women-friendly, and shared toilet blocks and facilities between men and women are cited as problems (Khan Foundation & Arrow, 2015; MacAdam & Bendinello, 2010). These conditions are especially common among adolescent girls, nursing mothers and pregnant women.
2. Sexual violence/harassment: Another serious issue in

disaster affected and temporary shelter environments are sexual harassment or sexual assault. Studies of shelters also suggest that around one in five women said they'd been subjected to sexual harassment and forced sex and/or violence (Khan Foundation & Arrow, 2015). The results indicate that privacy, protection measures, and safe shelter conditions are factors that can increase women's risk of sexual violence when they are not present.

3. Emotional and psychological abuse: Stress from climate change can also play a role in other forms of violence. Household tensions around water availability may also lead to domestic violence in the event of a water crisis linked to drought (Molyneaux et al., 2019). In the event of a disaster, the loss of life or inability of the male household members may put additional demands on women that place them at a higher risk of verbal and emotional abuse from their partners or relatives (Udas et al., 2019). The increased domestic workloads to collect water, prepare food, fetch firewood and attend to household members can further cause psychological distress. For women and girls, there can be a disruption of education when domestic duties increase (Dasgupta et al., 2010).
4. Health vulnerability: Vulnerabilities related to health are closely linked with the lack of adequate shelter and access to access services. Poor sanitation, lack of privacy, and lack of separate toilets, shower and living spaces can pose specific risks to women and adolescent girls (Dasgupta et al., 2010). WHO (2015) also describes health issues faced by adolescent girls due to problems with menstruation and maintaining hygiene. The findings suggest that health vulnerability must be taken into account due to its potential to heighten women's vulnerability and risk of harm in the context of GBV, as access to adequate sanitation, privacy and healthcare can make women feel less safe and protected.
5. Analytical Synthesis: The evidence collected and reviewed suggests that there is intersectionality between GBV and related vulnerabilities in post-disaster contexts. Poor shelter provision and access to water and sanitation, greater household burden, economic insecurity and lack of protection mechanisms may all add to women's vulnerability to violence and psychological stress. The evidence further indicates that there is a higher prevalence of reporting of physical and sexual violence, and less attention given to emotional and psychological violence. Thus, all disaster responses must focus on both direct acts of violence and structural conditions which can raise women's vulnerability.

Forms of GBV and Related Vulnerabilities Contributing to Women's Vulnerability

Climate change and climate-induced disasters may exacerbate existing social, economic, health and psychological vulnerabilities for women. Based on literature survey, it was identified that the major challenges can be categorized into five interconnected dimensions.

1. Inadequate Shelter, Safety and Sanitation: The risk for women and girls in disaster shelters is higher when they are overcrowded, lack privacy; there is poor lighting, shared sanitation and lack of gender-inclusive spaces. Speaking of limited access to separate toilets, bathing facilities and safe spaces, this may lead to increased exposure to harassment and violence, especially for women who have to travel outside shelters to fetch water or other essential resources (M. W. Ahmed & Uddin, 2025; Akhter et al., 2015).

2. Economic Insecurity and Additional Domestic Stress: Disasters can interfere with livelihoods, household income and household chores, all of which burden women further. Women might need to spend more time gathering water, food and fuel and at the same time provide care for the household and children. These pressures can limit their opportunities to work or school, and can cause stress in the family and other types of family violence (Azad et al., 2013; Brunson, 2017).
3. Restricted access to health and essential services: Access to reproductive health services, menstrual hygiene products, clean water, sanitation services and healthcare may be limited for women in disaster areas. The constraints can raise health risk and pose challenges in accessing timely medical and social assistance for those who experienced violence (Akter & Ali, 2014).
4. Vulnerability to psychological and physical health issues: Women can experience significant psychological stress as a result of exposure to displacement, violence, loss of livelihood and prolonged uncertainty. The physical or psychological violence experienced may exacerbate anxiety and depression, sleep disorders and chronic health issues. The lack of access to mental health and support services may exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Alam & Rahman, 2014; Fapohunda et al., 2025; Fatema, 2020; Fothergill, 1998).
5. Educational and Social Vulnerability: Climate induced displacement and additional responsibilities at home may be a factor in compromising girls' and young women's education. Post-disaster assigned extra domestic or care duties may impact school attendance and impact educational continuity of girls. This disruption can impact future social and economic opportunities and perpetuate gender inequalities (Neumayer & Plümper, 2007; Robles, 2020).

Generally speaking, these are interrelated problems and not separate. Poor housing, hygiene and sanitation may lead to higher vulnerability to violence, while limited access to education and healthcare may be a result of poverty and domestic duties. These converging stresses illustrate how climate-induced shocks can compound unequal gender norms and exacerbate women's vulnerability on many fronts.

Strategies to Combat GBV in Bangladesh

Women's vulnerability to climate-related disasters is multidimensional, involving safety, economic security; healthcare, psychological well-being, education, sanitation, and access to legal protection. The following recommendations can help mitigate the compounded impacts of climate change on women in Bangladesh (Figure 1).

Ensure the provision of safe and gender-sensate shelters: Inadequate privacy, overcrowding, unsafe sanitation facilities and insufficient gender responsive spaces found in the evacuation centres suggest that the design and management of disaster evacuation centres need to be improved. Shelters should have separate and secure toilets, bathing areas, sleeping areas, sufficient lighting and safe areas for women and girls. These measures can help to decrease exposure to harassment and violence, and enhance safety of women during displacement (K. J. S. Ahmed et al., 2019; Bhattarai et al., 2015).

Improve supportive services to survivors of violence

Sexual, physical, and psychological violence has been cited in the literature as salient aspects of women's

vulnerabilities before and after disasters. Thus, emergency medical treatment, trauma-informed counseling and psychosocial support, and availability of legal services should be integrated into disaster-response systems. Moreover, health facilities in disaster prone areas should be well equipped to offer appropriate post-assault care and referrals for those affected by sexual violence (Sullivan, 2018).

Improve Women's Economic Security and Social Protection

Studies indicate that evidence of livelihood disruption, household economic stress and burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities point to an important pathway for how disasters can exacerbate women's vulnerabilities. Vocational training, livelihoods, access to finance, and targeted social protection programs can help build women's economic resilience and minimize reliance on vulnerable household income streams (Alderman, 2010; Azad et al., 2013; Brunson, 2017).

Promote Gender-Responsive Disaster Preparedness and Decision-Making

The analysed evidence demonstrates that women's unique safety, health and livelihood needs can be heightened in the context of displacement and disaster recovery. Gender-responsive preparedness and response mechanisms should therefore include gender-responsive planning, train disaster response personnel on gender-inclusive response and involve women in local decisions related to disaster risk reduction and recovery (Murray, 2025; Pincha, 2008).

Ensure Women's Physical and Psychological Health within Disaster Response

Women's documented health and psychological vulnerabilities after disasters underscore the need for reproductive health services, menstrual hygiene support, essential medicines, psychological and psychosocial support services to be part of disaster-response systems. Special focus should be placed on women who have been subjected to violence or displacement, and those who have faced extended periods of uncertainty over their livelihoods (Pearson et al., 2023).

Ensure that girls' education continues

The literature suggests that girls' education is affected by disaster-related displacement, additional domestic duties and socioeconomic insecurity. Thus, educational continuity must be a priority in post disaster recovery programmes, including scholarships for girls, educational support, safe transport, temporary educational institution and mitigating domestic burden on girls. Continuing education participation can enhance long-term social and economic opportunities, and diminish intergenerational vulnerability (Sims, 2021).

Ensure access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities

The lack of sanitation, safe drinking water and privacy has been documented and shows the need of WASH facilities in reducing the health and safety risk to women. Provision of sufficient well-lighted, accessible and gender-segregated sanitation facilities, and adequate clean water and menstrual hygiene materials should be provided in disaster shelters and affected communities (Howard et al., 2016).

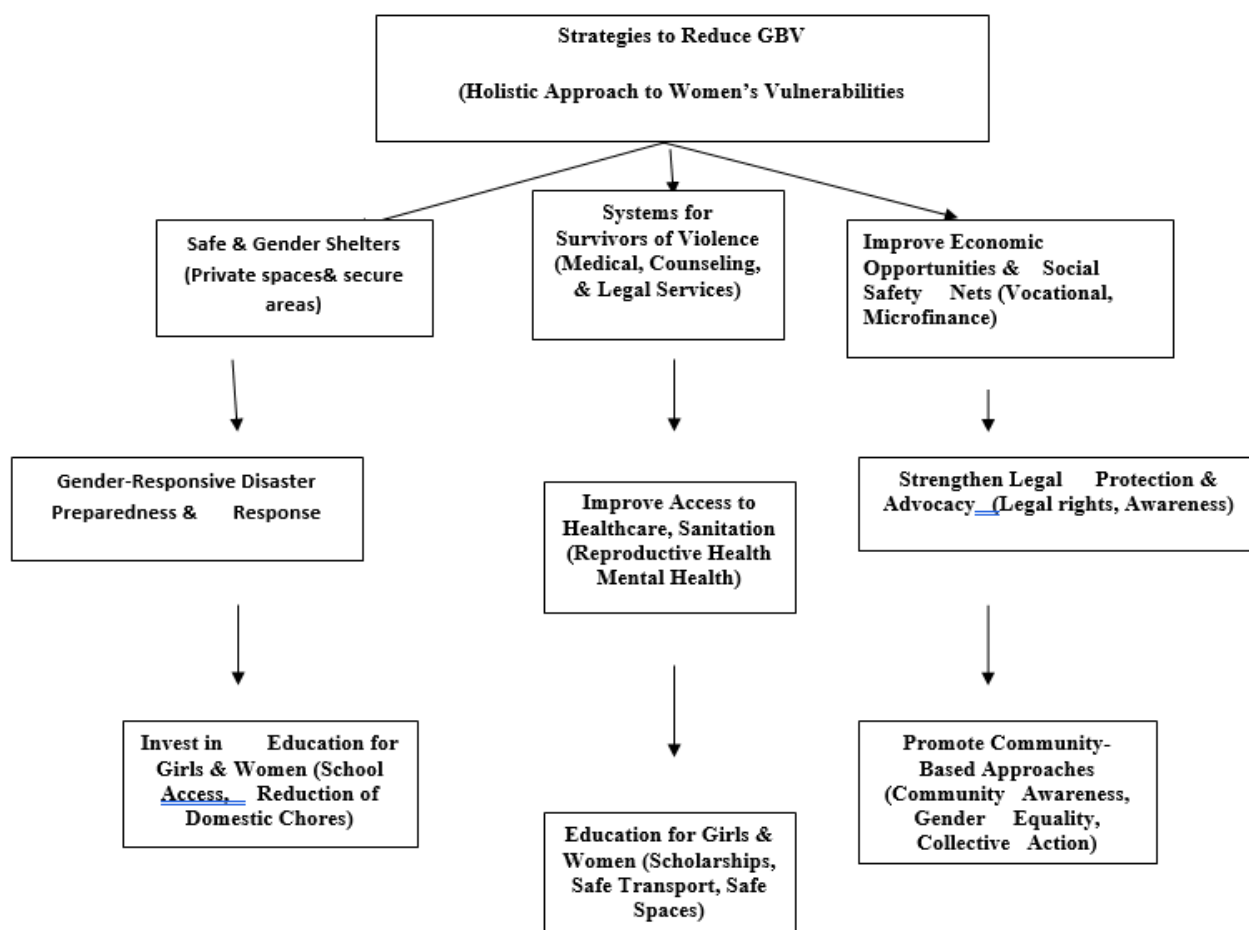


Figure 1. Strategies to Reduce GBV

Improve Access to Justice and Legal Protection

Available evidence shows that there are a number of different types of violence that can happen, which underscores the importance of having quick access to support and referral processes during disaster response and recovery. Local authorities need to provide women with protection services and a right to legal assistance without discrimination and in a secure environment where they can report violence. There should also be campaigns to raise awareness of women's rights, reporting, and support systems.

Create community prevention and awareness programs

Social norms, gender inequalities, and intra-household power dynamics reinforce women's vulnerabilities; hence, interventions in disasters need to go beyond emergency assistance. Community-based initiatives can advance gender parity by engaging community leaders, service providers, women's groups and other stakeholders, while changing harmful norms, bringing attention to the issue of violence prevention and enhancing community systems to protect women and girls (Allen et al., 2024).

The recommendations, as a whole, take the findings from the literature that was reviewed and make them into concrete action points. A focus needs to be on emergency protection but also on addressing women's vulnerability due to underlying socioeconomic and institutional conditions. Taking a gender-responsive approach to disaster response that integrates safe shelter, economic protection, health, education, sanitation, legal, and community engagement can help build resilience for women and girls in disaster contexts.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, this study analyzed the impact of climate change related disasters on gender-based violence (GBV) vulnerability of women by analyzing the available secondary evidence. The results suggest that exposure to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence is exacerbated during climate-induced displacement, by livelihood disruption and the resulting economic insecurity, by poor shelter and by limited access to sanitation and healthcare during displacement. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that vulnerabilities are exacerbated in climate vulnerability zones, such as coastal and flood impacted communities, where cyclones, floods and other climate hazards may multiply gender gaps and inequities.

The study also helps to fill the literature gap by integrating the social, economic, health, psychological and institutional aspects of GBV and climate change vulnerability of women. The results indicate that GBV is not a social issue in isolation but how disaster conditions

can magnify existing inequalities and result in multiple and interwoven forms of vulnerability. The synthesis also underscores the need for gender-responsive aspects of disaster preparedness and protection, health care, livelihoods, education, sanitation, and legal assistance.

There are still some caveats associated with this study, though. The analysis was conducted using secondary data and is therefore not a replacement for primary epidemiological estimates, nor are there any causal relationships between climate-related hazards and GBV drawn. However, direct comparisons of the number of reported cases over time may be affected by differences in definition, geographical coverage, data reported, and methods used for data collection. Available data may not reflect women's experiences of violence, especially where social stigma and service access is still high.

Going forward, these limitations should be addressed by primary research, longitudinal studies, and geographically disaggregated studies that explore the impact of specific climate hazards on various types of GBV. More focus should be placed on the experiences of women in coastal, riverine and flood exposed and/or displaced communities, and greater attention should be given to differences based on socioeconomic status, age, disability and access to resources. Future research should also assess the effectiveness of gender-responsive disaster interventions and examine if there is an adequate framework of policies and support in place to safeguard women before and during disaster preparedness and response and recovery. Filling these gaps in evidence can contribute to the development of more inclusive policies for climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, which will be sensitive to women's experiences and enhance their ability to benefit from and participate in climate resilience initiatives.

Author contributions

Rajib Chandra Das: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. Mohammad Shahin Alom: Literature Search, Source Selection, Data Curation, Thematic Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. Roney Chandra Das: Interpretation of findings, Source Selection, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.

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