

Emergency response course helps build women's confidence, overcome stereotypes

Case Study

June 2013

DHAKA, Bangladesh – In the Narinda community deep in Dhaka's historical area, Ms. Jubdaida Khanam, 23, works as a beautician in a local salon.

"I studied to become a beautician, but I also want to reach out to my community, and help them in times of disaster," Jubdaida said.

Jubdaida's interest to help her community led her to Bangladesh's Red Crescent Society, where she subsequently signed-up to become a youth volunteer. She was then nominated by the Red Crescent Society to undergo training for Community Action for Disaster Response in Emergencies (CADRE) with Asian Disaster Preparedness Center.

“ Before the training I honestly didn't know anything about emergency response. The course taught me, among many things, how to conduct first aid and how to extinguish fires, two practical skills for our community. ”

recalled Ms. Jubdaida Khanam, 23, who completed the Community Action for Disaster Response (CADRE) training course.



Photo by: Asian Disaster Preparedness Center
Ms. Jubaidah Khanam trains as a community responder.



Achieving gender equity through emergency preparedness

In Bangladesh, women play a central role in every community. Often, women provide the family's primary source of income, along side raising children and caring for the elderly.

However, as experienced through the eyes of Ms. Jubdaida Khanam, it is atypical for these same women to double their role as community emergency responders. Emergency response often requires not only trained skills, but physical ability to extinguish fires, rescue drown victims, and assist with lifting stretchers, to name a few of the CADRE volunteers' roles in times of emergency.

In this Case Study, CADRE volunteer Jubaida recounts a story where she was delayed with emergency response due to the fact the victims could not accept that she, the responder, was a woman – and more importantly, how she broke through this particular stereotype's glass ceiling.

Recommendations learned from this Case Study focus on integrating gender equity into CADRE course materials and strategizing on how to convince woman volunteers to continue volunteering, even after marriage and having children.

Courses like CADRE reportedly empower women to take-on non-traditional roles in their community, promoting gender equity through emergency response.

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Photo by: Asian Disaster Preparedness Center

Narrow streets of Dhaka's Narinda community make it difficult for emergency responders to access building fires..

Confidence-building life-skills

It wasn't long after Jubdaida's CADRE course when the first emergency occurred in her community.

"I was in my salon and a fire broke-out in the apartment building next-door, on the fifth floor I think," Jubdaida recalled.

In Dhaka, fires are the cause of numerous houses and local economies lost each year. With apartment buildings often less than 2-meters apart, fires spread quickly and can annihilate before emergency responders are able arrive to the scene.

“ I was ready: I ran next-door; found the fire extinguisher; and rushed to the kitchen where the fire had started, but then the men in the house stopped me. They said to me, **how could a girl know how to use an extinguisher?** ”

As a volunteer emergency responder, Jubdaida was prepared to extinguish a kitchen fire: she was not, on the other hand, prepared to experience gender inequity during such a scenario.

"I ran home and went to my family, and then they returned to the scene with me. They had to convince the owner of the apartment that I knew what I was doing," she said.

"As soon as they gave me permission, I extinguished the fire. Luckily it did not spread while they [the house owners] were deciding if it was suitable, or not, for a girl to save their home."

Basic emergency response, such as fire extinguishing may have an even longer-term impact: it helps build confidence with young women volunteers. Jubdaida explained that once she received her parents' support, she was very proud to show her neighbors that she knew how to respond to the emergency. In return, her neighbors praised her for her help, and one gender stereotype in the urban community was, like the fire she put out that day, extinguished.

"I could feel that they would no longer outcast me in times of emergency, just because I am a woman," Jubdaida said.

"It felt good," she continued, with a smile.

Husbands can volunteer, too

In Bangladesh, as in many societies throughout the world, a woman's responsibilities increase dramatically after marriage, and especially after having children. The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society reports that they often lose many of their talented female community volunteers once they are more obliged to stay at home to run the family.

"We experience this often. Young women are enthusiastic, but then in a time of an emergency they are no longer available once they're married. It's one of our challenges to keep our female community volunteers volunteering," Md. Ekram Elahi, Director of Disaster Response Management, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society commented, CADRE Focal Point for the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society in Dhaka commented.

"Our challenge is not getting young women to become volunteers, it's to encourage them to continue volunteering once they marry and have children," Mrs. Monoyara Sharker, Acting Secretary General, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, explained to ADPC in a recent interview.

Jubdaida's position is straightforward: when asked how she will cope with being an active emergency volunteer in her community after getting married she said, "It's no problem, I will teach my husband [the course] and we will volunteer together."

Gender sensitivities a recommendation

In times of disaster, often women represent a very vulnerable group, which need to be approached with necessary cultural and social sensitivity. In the case of the Nana Plaza building collapse in the Savar area of Dhaka, it was reported that many women, whose clothes were ripped from their bodies during the disaster, refused rescue. Rescue squads, needed in some cases, to sedate women to ensure timely rescue.

It was reported by rescue teams that, "a few women said they would rather die than face the humiliation of being rescued naked," Dr. Tamjida Sohani Hanfi, Senior Medical Officer of BRAC Bangladesh's Health, Nutrition and Population Program explained.

"Gender equity in emergency response, if of utmost importance," Mrs. Monoyara Sharker, Acting Secretary General, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society said. "It's one of our missions at the Red Crescent Society to address these challenges," she continued.

As Jubdaida recommended, "the CADRE course could [in the future] address these issues. In the course, we're all equal participants, so it's a good opportunity to learn how to overcome these challenges."



Photo by: Asian Disaster Preparedness Center

Young women from Sirajganj join monthly meetings on emergency preparedness..