

Disaster preparedness of women in coastal regions of Kerala

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Introduction

Disaster Preparedness involves measures taken prior to the onset of disasters. Preparedness activities focus on the actions taken by the people to minimize the effect of disaster in their lives. Response and reaction of an individual who have attained disaster preparedness training will be more structured since he/she have gone through capacity building activities, education on early warning system, evacuation and rescue methods, emergency communication methods and public awareness programmes. While UNISDR, stated that *preparedness is the knowledge and capacity developed by the government, professional organizations conducting emergency response and post-disaster recovery, the community and individuals – to effectively anticipate, respond, and recover from the impact of hazard or condition that could and would happen*. Disaster preparedness training includes anticipatory activities such as planning, resource identification, early warning systems, communication and alarm systems, public awareness, and physical training. The overall purpose is to improve the safety and effectiveness of a community's response during a disaster, alleviate negative impacts on weak populations, and to respond to and successfully survive dangerous situations. The risk of disaster can be minimized by channelizing the concept of disaster preparedness to the vulnerable population in India.

Background of the study

In this study the researcher is focusing on women group in the coastal lines of Kerala. The coastal region is vulnerable to natural hazards like cyclone, tsunami etc. Women living in coastal areas are subject to more risk. By providing essential training, women have a chance at becoming more resilient in the face of natural disasters.

Impact of tsunami is the women who hin order to secure their livelihoods and resources. By providing sufficient adaptive strategies, vulnerabilities can be reduced or decreased up to a limit. Portions of the Azhekkal village were damaged during the 2004 tsunami. Several people lost their lives. It is one of the major Tsunami affected areas in Kollam district. By providing

education on disaster preparedness we can make the people respond and react effectively to disasters. There were a good number of classes conducted on disaster preparedness by various NGO's like World Vision, Kasa. The training classes were conducted immediately after the disaster happened there. Major target group for the training classes were women. The training classes increased the self-confidence and mental strength of the individuals in the community. Aim of the training class was to make the people resilient in emergency situations because these regions are still vulnerable hazards like cyclones, high tides and tsunami. Therefore the researcher is curious to know whether the women group is prepared to face a disaster.

Methodology

Qualitative approach is used for the study in which face to face interview schedule is administered with the women group in Azhekkal region. Semi structured interview schedule is used for data collection. The knowledge on disaster preparedness is analyzed by focusing whether the women group is getting adequate training on disaster preparedness frequently, whether they are aware about early warning system in the community, emergency communication strategies, aware about evacuation and rescue operations during and after the disaster.

Results and discussions

Training on disaster preparedness

Training and education enable people to face critical conditions in their lives with confidence as well as enhancing problem solving skills. Disaster preparedness training provides people with concrete plans to keep resources and provisions on hand in the event of a disaster. The major objective of such training is to enable societies to better cope with the consequences of disaster. Training has both direct and indirect effects. The direct effects include cognitive skills, better knowledge, problem solving skills, and risk perception. Indirect effects include poverty reduction, access to information, and social capitals. In relation to disaster preparedness, training enhances knowledge about the warning signs of natural disasters so that precautionary measures may be taken in advance. Awareness of high risk factors greatly contributes to the reduction of vulnerability when disaster strikes. Disaster preparedness training includes anticipatory activities such as planning, resource identification, early warning systems, communication and alarm systems, public awareness, and physical training. The overall purpose is to improve the safety and effectiveness of a community's response during a disaster, alleviate negative impacts on weak populations, and to respond to and successfully survive dangerous situations.

- *We got training and they gave moral support and also gave solutions to recover from our present conditions*

- *In training class they have taught us that if any disaster occurs how to move out and how to help others*
- *The training class told about how to manage our mind and how to reduce our pain, so I think that it is very effective for me*
- *They told that different signs will appear as the disaster happens They told us that we should not stay in open space, and also keep the children safe*
- *After the tsunami we are aware about those huge waves, and all things about tsunami. After the disaster happened we began to learn about it*
- *I attended awareness classes on disaster preparedness, and we got lot of information. They told us how to escape from tsunami and how to evacuate from the place.*

All respondents attended training classes on disaster preparedness. They responded that before attending the training class they were not aware of how to be prepared for disaster. Organizations like “World Vision” and “Kasa” conducted the training classes. Women were the main target group for the training session. Training was conducted in the camp where they had been accommodated after the Tsunami. The discussions were about safety tips, early warning signs and systems, evacuation routes, emergency communication strategies, emergency plans, and recovery plans. Counseling sessions were also provided as part of the training classes. Some of the respondents mentioned that they were able to understand the concept of managing the mind and also how to maintain mental health. Thus, the training provided not only disaster planning, but also psychological wellbeing.

Early warning system

An integrated system of hazard monitoring, forecasting and prediction, disaster risk assessment, communication and preparedness activities systems and processes that enables individuals, communities, governments, businesses and others to take timely action to reduce disaster risks in advance of hazardous events (UNISDR). Community must be trained detecting the natural warning signs of a disaster so that the impact of disaster can be minimized. Some community maintain informal ways of early warning system within their community.

- *I used to listen announcements related to coastal regions in Radio and TV. I will share the information with my family members and neighbors. I want them to be aware of the same.*
- *We get announcements on disaster from the panchayath and district collector office. In the past, there were no such announcements regarding disasters. Now we have that. Many hours in advance, they announced that the sea is rising and it's a warning. In the past, we did not get enough time to pack clothes and evacuate. But now we are on alert.*
- *As tsunami approaches costal lines, water may recede from shore and sea floor is exposed and it is the natural warning sign for tsunami.*
- *Just before the onset on tsunami we could hear a heavy roaring sound of sea water , it is also warning sigh*

- *Usually animal can smell a disaster. It was our pet dog that has alerted us about tsunami last time. His unusual behavior prepared us for immediate response.*

Majority of them are aware about natural early warning system. They usually got disaster warning alert from nearby panchayat office, collector's office, police office and so on. The villagers also obtain information from media such as television and radio. From their remarks, we can deduct that these sorts of alerts are fundamental for the safety of coastal communities, particularly for fishermen. A portion of the respondents were able to identify early warning signs and signals such as changes in the waves on the shore, distinct ocean scents, and variations in ocean color that indicate an upcoming tsunami. Prior to the 2004 Tsunami, they didn't pay much attention to such indicators. As a result disaster preparedness training occurred after the tsunami, the villagers have been able to identify early warnings signs.

Evacuation and rescue operations

Evacuation and rescue at right time will reduce the impact of disaster. It is essential to train the vulnerable population in rescue operations to ease the stage of disaster recovery. The people living in coastal lines should be aware about the evacuation routes and rescue methods during the possible disasters like tsunami, cyclones etc.

- *We all will gather upstairs if we got sudden warning. If we have time we evacuate through bridge.*
- *Gather your family members, decide the meeting point if we are separated and move out from the disaster risk area. I think this is the best solution to avoid consequences.*
- *Before the onset of disaster, we should keep our valuables in a bag, if we get any announcement regarding disaster we should tie our dress and hair properly and should move out immediately*
- *There is a bridge, we can take the easy way and move out from there*

Some of the respondents mentioned that having a set evacuation route is a very important survival strategy for emergency situations. Evacuation is the process of moving from a dangerous place to a safe zone before the disaster occurs. Evacuation routes include running to the bridge or taking a boat to the mainland. As part of evacuation training, people are told to keep their valuables packed in a bag, ready to go. After receiving such instruction, people are in a better frame of mind to handle dangerous conditions.

- *They also taught us that if any disaster occurs, we should go upstairs and also try to wear dresses other than saree, and also climb up on to the trees.*
- *They can tie up their hair before the wave hits and also avoid wearing saree. Because it is more risk to wear such dresses and not easy to swim. These tips can be applicable to*

women. If we had been able to attend such classes before the tsunami happened, we would not take such precautions

A portion of the respondents have specifically pointed out some of the diverse safeguard strategies they learned from the instructional course on catastrophe readiness. For example, they learned about the importance of tying of long hair, of wearing clothes other than sarees, running upstairs to higher stories, and of climbing up trees. They understand that it may not be possible to totally escape from extraordinary dangerous situations. However, the villagers agree that these kinds of techniques will greatly help them to survive. They also feel empowered to help others as well.

Emergency communication strategies

Communication during and after the disaster is essential for response and recovery. It connects affected people with their relatives, friends, support systems and relief operations. Reliable and accessible communication is key for disaster preparedness. The people should be aware about the emergency contact numbers, government agencies in help during disaster and their immediate support system for rescue and recovery.

- *We use whistling or hauling as a informal communication mechanism to alert disaster events.*
- *Gathering place for all of us is Amma's ashram or our regional temple on the other shore.*
- *Before the Tsunami happened, I am not aware of emergency numbers. But now I know how to contact emergency team.*

The respondents are aware about the emergency contact phone numbers and their usefulness for getting help during disasters, for evacuation as well as services. They also mention that they have decided the common gathering place to meet after the disaster.

Conclusion

Disaster preparedness enhance the skills at the individual, household, and village levels. Disaster preparedness may enhance cognitive ability, information processing, and learning skills so individuals respond better in hard times, such as when the disaster strikes. It has been noticed that women's groups that participate in emergency relief, resettlement, and reconstruction efforts following a natural disaster acquire significant knowledge and expertise that can greatly benefit communities that subsequently experience similar crises.

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