

REDEFINING EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Women as decision-makers and leaders

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT - DHAKA

SHAHRIAR AZAM

Women must be placed at the centre of emergency response as decision-makers and leaders, speakers said at a roundtable, noting that limited access to information, economic dependence and patriarchal norms systematically exclude women from decision-making spaces during crises.

The roundtable, titled "Women in Emergency Response: Lead or Left Out?", was jointly organised by The Business Standard and CARE Bangladesh at TBS office on 9 December, with development practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and civil society representatives in attendance.

At the event, moderated by TBS Senior Executive Editor Sharier Khan, speakers called for leadership development, institutional and community-level support, and meaningful engagement of men to ensure women's voices are heard, particularly in disaster management committees and local governance.

This event is organized as part of the advocacy strategy under the Women Lead in Emergencies (WLIE) project to observe 16 days of activism against gender based violence funded by AFD - Agence Française de Développement.



DR MOHAMMED MEHRUL ISLAM
SENIOR DIRECTOR, CARE
BANGLADESH

Emergencies continue to test us, and the nature, gravity, and impact of each disaster are evolving. Women must lead in emergency response, and their decision-making significantly improves the quality of outcomes.

Many systemic barriers still prevent women's participation, but grassroots voices show that empowering women enhances effectiveness. We must keep discussing, learning, and ensuring women are not left out.

Evidence proves that where women lead, results are better, and with more women and girls involved, delaying their participation is pointless.

This requires continuous action, integrating findings into policy and programmes, and committing to gender-transformative emergency responses across communities.



RAWNAK JAHAN
DIRECTOR OF WOMEN AND YOUTH
PROGRAMME, CARE BANGLADESH

Educating men and building trust are crucial to changing harmful social norms and driving cultural shifts. Violence is still normalised, so we must raise our voices against any form of abuse.

Gender-transformative programming is essential, and we need to reconsider what truly counts as an emergency for women. Control over resources and technology must be ensured, and women's participation in disaster drills and decision-making should be visible and meaningful.

Root cause analysis is critical to understanding why men exercise control and how we can address it effectively.



In my presentation, I shared findings from our Rapid Gender Analysis on Power and Participation under the which is funded by Agence Française de Développement (AFD).

We found that marginalised women face persistent barriers, such as patriarchal attitudes, heavy unpaid care work, economic dependence, and limited access to information, that systematically block their participation in decision-making.

Even where they are present in union parishad meetings or disaster management committees, their influence is minimal.

Our research, using FGDs, KIIs, and community mapping, shows exclusion intensifies after disasters, creating a recurring cycle. Breaking this requires leadership development, institutional support, and engaging men to challenge social norms.



PROF. DR. TANIA HAQUE
WOMEN AND GENDER STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

I believe that in Bangladesh, across both natural and man-made crises, women continue to be treated as passive recipients rather than active agents in humanitarian response.

Despite theoretical progress, we remain weak in practice because deep-rooted socio-cultural norms still define women as incapable or burdensome. Women pay an invisible "reproductive tax" through unpaid care work, creating severe time poverty that limits leadership opportunities.

Yet evidence consistently shows that projects perform better when women are meaningfully involved, drawing on their lived experience and emotional intelligence. The real crisis lies in how we evaluate women's work and leadership. From family to state, we must decide whether we see women as leaders or liabilities—and transform our masculine systems into truly human ones.



Standing here, I feel proud because I am just a rural woman who rarely gets space to speak. In our families, villages, or even union parishads, women are often silenced or asked to "come later."

I have seen how the lack of access to mobile phones deepens this exclusion. In many households, men control phones, while women are denied access, cutting us off from early disaster warnings, meetings, and government support.

Since joining the Women Lead in Emergency project, I have learned, through group sessions,

discussions, and community activities, how far behind women are pushed and how collective action can change this.

Access to information is not a luxury; it is essential for women's safety, participation, and leadership.



SHARMIN ISLAM
GENDER TEAM LEADER, UNDP

The absence of women's leadership is not because women lack capacity, but because society refuses to believe they can lead. Data proves this bias: UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index shows that nearly 99% of people in Bangladesh, women and men alike, hold some prejudice against women.

Yet global evidence also shows that when women participate in peace negotiations or crisis response, success rates improve because women prioritise empathy, inclusion and win-win solutions.

Still, our culture systematically silences women, from grassroots communities to national movements, and even subjects vocal women to violence, including in digital spaces. Leadership must be reimagined as collaborative, rights-based and transformative, engaging both women and men.



SOHANUR RAHMAN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BANGLADESH
MODEL YOUTH PARLIAMENT

I have seen how exclusion costs lives. In Afghanistan, women were left unmet after an earthquake simply because there were no female rescue workers.

That risk exists everywhere if we fail to plan inclusively. By contrast, in Nepal and the Philippines, women-led response teams and safe spaces proved vital—not just for relief, but for mental healing. Disasters also fuel poverty, displacement and child marriage, creating a vicious cycle intensified by climate change.

Early action, digital warnings used responsibly, and cash support before disasters can break this cycle. Most importantly, women must be decision-makers, because gender equality strengthens families, communities and emergency leadership alike.

I work in Barguna with the Women Leading Emergency project, witnessing how disasters expose women's vulnerabilities at every stage. From early warnings to shelter

and involving them actively in preparation, planning, and decision-making is essential to build confidence and resilience.



RAISUL ISLAM
MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN
AFFAIRS (MOWCA)

Gender-based violence persists not just in emergencies but in everyday life. Laws exist, yet implementation often falls short. DNA tests are now mandatory, punishments for rape increased, and child marriage prevention strengthened, but real change depends on enforcement.

Women's participation in crisis response, from One-Stop Crisis Centres to hotline services, ensures their voices are heard and needs addressed. Over 6,000 calls daily reflect both urgency and the gaps that remain.

True protection and empowerment require not only laws but effective, inclusive implementation that recognises women as active agents in shaping their safety and communities.



SANJIDA AHMED
GENDER, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION
AND PROTECTION ADVISOR,
PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Working in gender, diversity, and protection, it is clear that patriarchal norms remain deeply rooted despite years of interventions. Many programmes touch the surface, giving instructions like "do not commit violence" without addressing why such behaviours persist.

Engaging men, boys, and youth strategically is crucial; mapping their availability, understanding their influence, and fostering discussions across age groups helps shift norms.

Women are often seen as passive during disasters, yet their knowledge and resilience can guide response and adaptation. Focusing on root causes, qualitative engagement, and recognising women's agency is essential for lasting change.



MITALI JAHAN
PROGRAMME MANAGER, LEGAL
PROTECTION
SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND LEGAL
PROTECTION (SELP), BRAC

seen is that harmful social norms start in the family and community.

Even with progressive laws in place, implementation often fails, and women still operate under patriarchal influence.

During disasters, women face immense stress, managing household care, childcare, and eldercare, while shelter homes often lack proper facilities. Empowerment cannot succeed alone; we need family, community, and men as allies.

Respect, recognition, and shared responsibility are essential. Without collective support, laws and skills alone cannot ensure women's safety or equality.



KAMRUN NAHAR
MEMBER, NABI POKKHO

Bangladesh is rich in laws, yet women's lives remain shaped by discrimination embedded within those very legal and constitutional frameworks.

Passing new laws—often symbolically, even ceremonially—has never addressed these core inequalities. Those who challenge them are attacked, and the state's silence has normalised that violence.

Women's exclusion from disaster management reflects this deeper failure of accountability. Policies like Gender Action Plans exist, but who ensures their implementation, and who obstructs them?

Unless discriminatory laws are reformed, perpetrators held accountable and women treated as full citizens, not dependents, our preparedness and resilience will remain fundamentally broken.



MO MO SHEY
TECHNICAL COORDINATOR-MEAL AND
COMMUNICATIONS, CARE BANGLADESH

Growing up in disaster-prone Barguna, it became clear that women's voices are rarely heard during emergencies. Announcements about crises are almost always made by men, leaving pregnant women, adolescent girls, and others uncertain about what actions to take.

Disaster drills often show women only as assistants or victims, never decision-makers. Household contingency plans assume women bear the full burden, while men's responsibilities remain invisible.

Demonstrating women's lead-

I work closely with women in vulnerable communities, focusing on power and participation. I realised that many see power only as money or authority, but knowledge and skills are power too.

To truly empower women, we must first equip them with knowledge about governance, disaster management, and protection mechanisms. Participation isn't just presence—it's meaningful inclusion.

Women must be recognised as leaders, not token representatives. At the same time, household dynamics matter: do they control resources, make decisions? Addressing both external participation and internal empowerment ensures they become active agents of change, capable of leading in emergencies and beyond.