



Issues with families and children in a disaster context: A qualitative perspective from rural Bangladesh



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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters such as floods and cyclones have repeatedly devastated lives and destroyed the belongings of people. This is especially so for children and their families in Bangladesh. This study analyzed the specific aspects of vulnerability of children (birth to eight years) and their families in natural disasters and their resilience and preparedness in natural disaster contexts. Qualitative field data suggest that, when faced with extreme natural forces, people suffered but coped with their changed situation. The data showed that families, who sometimes lost everything, had their way of living drastically changed. They had to live a life that was not preferable or emotionally acceptable to them. Women and children are affected most during any disastrous situation. Throughout this study it was evident that trauma brought fear and disturbance, which made children feel anxious, even after the cessation of the disaster. Both physical and mental illness appeared in specific cases. It was also found that children felt helpless and frustrated in terms of school-related issues, a lack of space to play, and scarcity of food. Instinctive survival strategies and intra-community cooperation improved coping post cyclone. This study recommends that disaster reduction strategies should include activities for enhancing services for birth to eight year olds in disaster settings and encourage mitigation while being aware of localized realities, which affect each community's coping mechanisms and ability to adapt.

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1. Introduction and brief review of the literature

1.1. Disaster and children's vulnerable situation

Bangladesh is currently ranked as one of the world's most disaster-prone countries [1]. Disastrous hazards, in particular, cyclones and floods, destroy infrastructure and displace people. In society, children are considered as little ones and less powerful, therefore making them more vulnerable in a disaster period. Disasters adversely affect all aspects of children's daily lives and their life chances as covered by the CRC (Convention on the Right of the Child) [2]. Children's normal lives become disrupted. They may suffer from fear, anxiety and trauma. Children's rights to

survival, protection, nutritious food and clean water, sanitation, health related facilities, safety and security and education remain in serious shortage at that time which makes them vulnerable. Peek [3] explored the degree of children's vulnerability to disasters and categorized the vulnerability in three terms, (1) psychological vulnerability, (2) physical vulnerability and (3) educational vulnerability.

1.1.1. Psychological vulnerability

When emergencies occur, infants and young children are the most vulnerable segment of the population [4]. It is therefore a priority to direct aid to support their wellbeing. Children's psychological responses to natural disaster have been studied over time but are largely ignored in many countries. However, the most widely studied reaction to disasters has been post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or related symptoms [5,6]. In their review, Norris and colleagues [6] found that young people were more likely to be affected by disasters than adults, with 48 percent of school-age

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samples suffering from moderate post-disaster impairment and 52 percent experiencing severe or very severe effects. But the responses of children to disaster may vary by age group and stage of physical and mental development, and types of disaster. For toddlers and very young children (1–4 years), problems include clinginess, dependence, nightmares, refusing to sleep alone, irritability and temper tantrums, aggressive behavior, incontinence, hyperactivity, and separation anxiety [6]. Older children (5–12 years) exhibited marked reactions of fear and anxiety, increased hostility with siblings, somatic complaints, sleep disorders, problems with school performance, social withdrawal, apathy, reenactment through play, PTSD and anxiety [7]. It is evident that teenagers (13–18 years) experienced decreased interest in social activities and school, rebellion and other behavioral problems, sleep and eating disorders, somatic complaints, increased or decreased physical activity, confusion, lack of concentration, and a decline in responsible behaviors [8].

Child abuse and gender sensitive issues in disaster settings have been investigated through several studies. For example, Save the Children [8] notes that when any disaster occurs, children in shelter houses suffer from the lack of space, sharing rooms with strangers, the lack of privacy (especially girls), physical abuse and sexual harassment. They are not involved in decision making or given information and do not get enough food because they are beaten or pushed out of queues, their food is snatched or they are offered only scraps at the end. Table 1 shows how emotional wellbeing suffered after cyclone Sidr hit Shatkira, Bangladesh in November 2007.

1.1.2. Physical vulnerability

Infants, young children, and pregnant and lactating women (PLW) are recognized as groups prone to being affected physically by any kind of disastrous event. They are vulnerable in terms of insufficient access to food due to their nutritional requirements, proper medical treatment or supplies, and lack of awareness of safety and good health. Food shortages, drought, reduced rainfall, salinity of water, and flooding have very negative effects on agriculture, which eventually affect the young growing child very seriously in terms of lack of nutritious food [2].

Natural disasters can affect children's health in three main ways. The first is a direct effect on children's morbidity and mortality (e.g., a child drowns in a flood, illnesses from contamination of food or water). Family disruption caused by the loss of a parent or other caretaker can also result in poor health outcomes after a disaster occurs. The second effect is through the disaster's impact on the supply of health care. By destroying, damaging, or straining health infrastructure, natural disasters affect access to health care. The third effect is through the disaster's impact on the demand for health inputs, mainly through loss of income as well as increased expenditure needed to cope with a disaster [10].

In agricultural societies, disasters such as droughts and floods may create significant income shocks from the damage to crops and livestock, and it has an indirect impact on reducing the demand for health inputs. The impacts of natural disasters are also likely to vary by child and household characteristics, such as a child's gender and age, and parent's education [11]. On the one hand, infants may be less prone to nutritional deficiencies or adverse health effects from water or food contamination because of exclusive breastfeeding [10]. On the other hand, if the mother suffers from malnutrition then there is a possibility the child will not get enough nutrition from the breast milk.

1.1.3. Educational vulnerability

A study conducted by the Bangladesh Education Cluster noted the severe and harmful impacts of disaster on children's education [14]. This study explained that natural hazards, such as cyclones, floods, flash floods and riverbank erosion, damaged schools' infrastructure, disrupted educational activities and displaced children and their families. Disasters have both psychological and physical impacts on children such as lack of shelter, water and sanitation; reduced health and an increase in the need for food aid; and the higher rates of child abuse. In addition, the overall experience of going through the catastrophic conditions of the disaster affect the education and learning activities of children. The deprivations children suffer from contribute to their physical and emotional distress and this extends to the loss of learning materials and reduced access to schools. In disaster struck areas children lose precious education hours, often resulting in lower academic performance, higher dropout rates and the denial of the basic right to education [14]. Children often become unable to take part in educational activities because they are emotionally distressed or their families have temporarily migrated or school buildings have collapsed. Save the Children [8] ran an investigation in the post disaster period of cyclone Sidr, and found that the effects of the disaster may have increased both the number of children not enrolled in school and the number of children who dropped out of school because they joined the workforce to help their family get necessary resources. This added challenges for children to later enter the formal education system due to stigma and shame in school, and the inability to catch up [12].

The educational consequences due to disasters affect the learning system in many ways. Save the Children Alliance [8] indicated that the child's personal situation directly affects their education, while the system and social contexts have an indirect impact on the education system [13] (Table 2).

We can see, for example, that migration due to climate change may influence the shape of displacement of students and teachers, delayed enrollment, multiple school changes, and family instability. Family instability may result in the loss of vital records, delayed enrollment, and the child may feel the school

Table 1
Impacts on children's wellbeing after cyclone Sidr. Source: [8] (adapted) in Rahman [9], p. 253.

Issues	Concern
Insecurity	Potential attack by another natural calamity or intruders at night due to the exposed nature of their temporary shelter and living alone while parents fetched relief; an influx of 'outsiders' in the village (mostly for relief effort) created insecurity for children.
Gender-based violence	Damage of accommodation and sanitation infrastructures pushed children to live in new places, often sleeping in the same bed with extended relatives; the absence of safe latrines compelled adult girls and women to go toilet in the field after night fall, exposing them to harassment and molestation.
Economic exploitation of children	Loss of family livelihoods pushed a marked number of children into a range of dangerous or exploitative labor (e.g. factory worker, day laborer (agriculture, construction), household help etc.). This exposed them to financial, emotional and sexual abuse at the same time.
Migration/ trafficking	Unsupervised and careless child migration to predominantly urban areas for work or joining an extended family member due to loss of crops, capital items etc. enabled child trafficking.
Early marriage	An endemic issue, which had increased appeal to families after the disaster, as it could be a survival strategy (reducing no. of dependents) and also a way of protecting family honor (reducing chance of being shamed by rape).

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