



IMPACT STORY



WOMEN LEAD POST-CYCLONE RECOVERY IN BANGLADESH AMID COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Photo: Courtesy of Prerona

“When the first storm hit, I knew that this time around it would be a bigger challenge for the women in Satkhira. Between a pandemic and a disaster, we didn’t know what to worry about more. But the starting point in helping these communities is to engage women in the response and planning,” said Shampa Goswami, who leads ‘Prerona Nari Unnayan Sanggathan’ (Prerona), a community-based women’s organization in the Satkhira district in the southern tip of Bangladesh.

Goswami was referring to the super cyclone Amphan that ravaged the coasts of India and Bangladesh on 20 May.

The Satkhira district was one of the hardest hit areas in the country. The cyclone washed away embankments, mud homes and fisheries, which thousands of families relied upon for their livelihoods, and sanitation infrastructures collapsed.

Prior to Amphan, the COVID-19 outbreak had already brought Bangladesh to a grinding halt on 26 March 2020. With almost 70 thousand cases reported and thousands more losing their livelihoods because of the lockdown measures, for marginalized communities living in disaster-prone areas the challenges are compounded.

In five of the most disaster-prone areas of Bangladesh, UN Women partnered with 56 grassroots women’s organizations, including Prerona, to make sure women’s

perspectives, needs and leadership are fully incorporated into disaster risk reduction and crisis management, and to build livelihood opportunities in the recovery. Organizations like Prerona and women leaders like Goswami are vital actors on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19, as well as climate disasters.

PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

UN Women, through the **National Resilience Programme** and the **EmPower: Women for Climate-Resilient Societies** project, has been training and supporting organizations like **Prerona** in building skills and leadership so that they can play active roles in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. This work was possible due to the financial support from the **UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office** and the **Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency**.

Regular resources provided the basis for launching the programme, funding productivity studies that generated strong evidence for designing it in line with women’s needs during disaster planning and response.

For more information about UN Women and our work, see the [Annual Report 2019-2020](#) and the [Regular Resources Report 2019](#).

Photo above: Shampa Goswami (pictured right) and the Prerona team distribute food packets and masks at cyclone shelters in the wake of cyclone Amphan.

When Amphan hit the Bangladesh coastline on 20 May, Goswami and her team swung into action, helping with evacuation of around 150 women and men to shelters.

“Many people did not want to leave their houses because first, they were not sure about the high intensity of the cyclone and second, they feared getting infected by COVID-19,” explained Goswami. “My team and I convinced them to go to the shelter to save their lives and to wear masks to protect themselves from the disease. I also turned on the radio [so that they could hear, first-hand] about the intensity of Amphan. At that time, the danger was rated at 10 for Satkhira. I was also scared for myself and my team, as we were going door-to-door to evacuate people, in the middle of a pandemic. But it gave me peace of mind knowing that we were able to evacuate at least 150 people.”

For the next two days, the Prerona team of 15 women and three men continued to visit the shelters, distributing food packets and masks. They talked to the people in the shelters about the importance of wearing masks at all times and maintaining physical distancing.

“Women’s distinctive knowledge, skills and networks can help communities prepare, respond to [disasters] and bounce back better.”

2.4 million people were evacuated to some 12 thousand shelters set up throughout the coastal districts of Bangladesh. Maintaining physical distancing in these shelters was a major challenge.

Knowing that the poorest and most vulnerable were lacking access to affordable personal protection equipment, Prerona also mobilized 250 women, including widows, women with disabilities and women heads of households to make almost 42,500 masks and protective gear. The women were trained in batches of five, maintaining physical distancing, to learn new skills and earn some income from the sale of protective gear.

Cultivating women’s leadership is critical in times like these. UN Women, through the National Resilience Programme and the “EmPower: Women for Climate-Resilient Societies” project, has been training and supporting organizations like Prerona in building skills and leadership so that they can play active roles in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

WHEN CRISES STRIKE, GENDER INEQUALITIES ARE OFTEN EXACERBATED







- Women and girls are disproportionately exposed to risk, increased loss of livelihoods, security, and even lives, during and in the aftermath of disasters. During monsoon season in Bangladesh, women and girls are disproportionately affected by flooding as many cannot swim or are unable to leave their homes due to cultural barriers.
- Disaster damage and loss assessments are seldom disaggregated by sex and are usually recorded in terms of productive resources, which tend to be owned by men. This leads to a substantial undervaluation of the impact on women.

“Women bring a breadth of solutions when it comes to adapting to climate change and responding to disasters,” explained Dilruba Haider, Programme Specialist with UN Women in Bangladesh. “Their distinctive knowledge, skills and networks can help communities prepare, respond to and bounce back better. Supporting and amplifying the voices of civil society leaders like them can have a snowball effect on how women and communities fare through this crisis,” she added.

Even as the economy starts opening, and trains and ferries start running again, business isn’t the same and livelihood opportunities are still limited after the COVID-19-induced lockdown.

“The hard work begins now to recover better and stronger. Women in farming, fishing, agriculture and small enterprises that are especially vulnerable to climate change, have all lost their livelihoods, and this is where the support is needed,” said Goswami.

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