Women’s Health in Natural Disasters: A Vulnerability Analysis¹

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Abstract – Women are among the most vulnerable groups of society in natural disasters. In this regard, the aim of the present study is to identify the influential factors of women’s vulnerability in natural disasters and proposing strategies to reduce the risk. This study has been conducted in Iran consisting a narrative review and a qualitative study (focus group discussion) in order to determine the views of decision makers and to propose strategies for improving approaches to reduce women’s vulnerability in disasters. The main findings of this study include: lack of needs assessment regarding women in disaster situations; insufficient legal support of women; need for more credits to be allocated for women in disaster management issues; absence of enough female experts in the field of disaster management; lack of women’s presence especially in the responsible government agencies; constant use of men as relief and rescuers without having women in the team; and lack of specialized centers to train women for relief and rescue activities.

Keywords – women’s health, vulnerability analysis, natural disasters, qualitative study

1. Introduction

Disasters that happen in the last few years have necessitate the focus on special needs of women in various disaster cycles especially during and after disasters (Seaman and Maguire, 2005). The gender role of women has caused them to be under the death threat due to their social, cultural and biological differences in comparison to men (Meleis, 2005). From the health view, the consequences of floods in New York in 1972 can be an example. This flood which followed the hurricane Agnes, have made the water polluted with chemical toxins and caused the spontaneous abortion in many pregnant women in 1973 (Cordero, 1993 and Janerich et al., 1981). Also, the tsunami that affected the Indian Ocean in 2004 is another example in which the cultural issues caused the increase in women’s death. In this disaster, the death rate of women was three times than men. In a study by Carballo in 2005, the reason for women’s vulnerability was mentioned as cultural problems, since most of women did not know how to swim and therefore could not survive. Also some common traditions in that area such as, keeping the long hairs, caused women to get trapped in the debris caused by floods and therefore got drawn. In addition, livelihood problems and attempt to protect the children were among one of the social factors which was identified by Carballo et al., 2005. After the natural disasters, women are usually under the threat of sexual harassment. Chaos, insecurity, problems in social relations, and the pressure on women for providing food and settlement in emergencies can result in their sexual abuse and threat of the sexually transmitted diseases. The impact of these events can bring many negative consequences in long-term (Sapir, 1993 and Carballo, 2005).

Risk analyses consist of two parts: hazard analysis and vulnerability analysis; and recent part refers to the factors which cause a society deal with natural disasters or man-made crises and complex emergencies (Baas et al., 2008). Based on this definition, those people who suffer injuries and damages against the occurrence of these events are called vulnerable populations. Research findings and experience from previous disasters have shown that women are among the most vulnerable groups of society in natural disasters (Fothergill, 1996, and Izadkhah and Jahangiri, 2013). However, problems of women in the broad context of disasters and emergencies have only been addressed recently. Gender usually has not been a conscious criterion employed by relief agencies to effectively assist the so

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called “vulnerable groups” in their special needs when an emergency or disaster occurs. Vulnerability of women is a fact, based on the larger number of women and woman-headed households in emergencies and on the responsibilities borned by women related to the stability of the domestic group, including a disproportionate responsibility for dependent children.

Using Iran as a case study is because Iran is considered as one of countries most under the threat and at risk of natural disasters in the world. Thus, disaster management and disaster risk reduction are among important issues in this country. If disaster management is a collection of theoretical concepts and practical measures that is done in three stages; pre, during and post disaster, risk analysis should be addressed at the first step in pre-disaster stage. In this regard, the aim of the present study is to identify the influential factors of women’s vulnerability in natural disasters and proposing strategies to reduce the risk.

2. Methods

This study has been conducted in Iran in 2007-2008 which consists of two types of research and data collection:

- The first part is a narrative review of the written documents, electronic books and sources as well as related published papers.
- The second part is a qualitative study (Focus group discussions) in order to determine the decision maker’s point of view and to propose strategies for improving approaches to reduce women’s vulnerability in future disasters.

Fifteen experts and executive practitioners who have participated in the first seminar on Disaster Management agreed to participate in this small-scale study.

3. Results

The findings of this research suggest a wide range of problems and shortcomings which can be considered as causes of vulnerability of women in disasters and will be addressed afterwards in the next two sections.

3.1. Narrative review

The findings and results of the causes of women’s vulnerability in disasters were the following issues which are somehow in accordance with existing national and international cases:

- Financial dependence on male members of households with illiterate or low-literate women and their passive roles in family and community, especially in rural areas and small towns (Maleki, 2010);
- The physiological conditions of women - such as pregnancy and lactation - also supervision of children and their specific needs in this era, places women among one of the vulnerable groups in the society (Mothers Health Program in Crises 2003);
- Women experience the greatest stress due to their multiple responsibilities and generally inferior social status (Izadkhah and Jahangiri, 2013). It is well known that stress weakens a woman’s resistance to diseases and adversely affects her ability to undertake essential economic and family activities;
- Lack of full presence of women in public organizations where the large number of managers are men, particularly in disaster management. This actually leads in ignoring women main needs in disaster situations;
- Marginalization due to lack of adequate decision-making power and control over resources which is one of the most striking common elements between women in developing countries and those in disaster prone areas;
- The health of women affects the well-being of their family, and often their entire community. A woman’s health is the key to survival and health of her children. Her knowledge of diet, preparation of food, and personal and household hygiene figure importantly in the health of her family. Also, her common role as birth attendant may have a direct impact on the health of a large part of the community. An unhealthy woman, who cannot properly provide for herself, clearly cannot attend to the needs of her family and others;
- Also, following the disaster event, due to the lack of job opportunities and high number of female headed households, the number of women who are unwillingly forced into doing jobs which are not accepted by society increases (Al Gasseer et al., 2004). This could also be counted as an underlying abuse of women and to promote prostitution;
- There is a need to investigate the causes of women’s vulnerability in disasters with regard to the specific characterization of each country especially developing countries such as Iran (Izadkhah, 2008). The existing traditional and cultural limitations which Iranian society imposes on women can intensify their vulnerability.

3.2. Qualitative study

Based on the interviews and meetings with the focus group, the main findings of the influential factors of women’s vulnerability in natural disasters were:

- Lack of need assessment regarding women in disaster situations;
- Insufficient legal support of women;
- Need for more credits to be allocated to women in disaster management issues;
- Lack of women’s presence especially in the responsible government agencies;
- Absence of enough female experts in the field of disaster management;
- Constant use of men as relief and rescuers without involving women in the team; and
- Lack of specialized centers to train women for relief and rescue activities.
4. Conclusions

Disasters that have occurred in recent years reveal the necessity of considering specific needs of women in various stages of disaster management cycle, especially during and after the disaster (Seaman and Maguire 2005). Women are more than men at risk of morbidity and mortality because of their gender role in terms of social, cultural and biological aspects (Meleis, 2005).

The main strategies that could be suggested in this paper in order to reduce the vulnerability of women in disasters include: increasing public education; activating women’s communication networks; reinforcing practical skills for women facing disasters; reinforcing women’s NGOs for the purpose of forming humanitarian activities in crisis prevention; legislation for supporting women; conducting appropriate research and present the results to relevant authorities; allocating roles for women in relevant organizations; defining special positions for women in the headquarters and dispatching teams in disaster regions; and training skills in all areas related to women’s health especially in reproductive health in natural disasters and crisis situations.

References


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Citation