



KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE

SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE EXERCISE EXCHANGE: WPS TRAINING

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SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE EXERCISE EXCHANGE (DREE)

INTRODUCTION

From July 12-20, 2023, the US Pacific Army (USARPAC) hosted the South Asia Regional Disaster Response Exercise Exchange at the Guam National Guard Readiness Center in Barrigada, Guam.

Within the US Department of Defense, combatant commands are increasingly called upon to engage in humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HA/DR). For instance, USARPAC through the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), is responsible for coordinating Disaster Response Exercise & Exchanges (DREEs) under the "Unity of Effort" banner, of which this event was one. DREEs are multilateral and multinational coordination, communication, and cooperation exercises between USARPAC and partner nation armed forces, and emergency responders. USARPAC invited partner institutions to engage in disaster response training for relevant actors in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. As part of the program, Pacific Forum International arranged training in Women, Peace and Security (WPS) principles for the participants on July 13 and 14, 2023. Steve Recca of Pacific Disaster Center led training on July 13, and Ambika Vishwanath and Priyanka Bhide of the Kubernein Initiative, India, led training on July 14. The four participating countries sent about 70 participants, mostly from disaster response services, and of them, 20 participated in the two-day WPS training, including:

- 5 from Bangladesh
- 7 from the Maldives
- 4 from Nepal, and
- 4 from Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION AND FUNDAMENTALS

As environmental degradation and climate change intensify throughout the Indo-Pacific region, natural disasters will pose greater and greater threats that impact the wellbeing of millions of people across the region. Coping with the response and recovery efforts of such disasters often requires the support of other states (including foreign militaries) and the international humanitarian community to provide resources and know-how. However, more and more, national militaries are playing critical roles in aiding humanitarian responses to climate-related and natural disasters. The effectiveness, benefits/costs, and impact of armed force involvement in humanitarian responses depend in part on how closely local community members are consulted. In particular, meaningful consultations with women and women's groups ensures armed forces are better prepared to respond through localized approaches and greater coordination.

US WPS policies, including the Women, Peace, and Security Act (2017) and the WPS Strategy (which was passed in 2019 and supersedes the 2016 National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security). recognize that women must be critical actors in all efforts to achieve sustainable international peace and security. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on WPS notes that civilians, especially women and children,

PARTICIPANTS

Participating Defense Force Branches:

United States Army Pacific
 Bangladesh Army
 Bangladesh Navy
 Bangladesh Air Force
 Maldives National Disaster Management Authority
 Maldives National Defense Force
 Maldivian Coast Guard
 Nepali Army
 Sri Lanka Disaster Management Centre
 Sri Lanka Police

Organizations:

Pacific Disaster Center:
<https://www.pdc.org/>

Kubernein Initiative:
<https://kuberneininitiative.com/>

account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons, and are increasingly targeted by combatants and armed elements, and recognizes the impact of this on durable peace and reconciliations.

The Resolution further affirms the crucial role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflict and in peacebuilding, stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in efforts to maintain and promote peace and security, while increasing their roles in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. UNSCR 1325 encourages all member states to adopt a National Action Plan on WPS (NAP) in order to plan for its full implementation, though some states choose to implement WPS in other policies and structures. Of the countries involved in this engagement, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal all have WPS NAPs (the Maldives and India do not).

The WPS agenda relates to disaster management insofar as disasters have different impacts on women, men, girls, and boys. In Nepal, a study showed 71% of men receive early warning from a formal source while 51% of women receive warnings through informal and social sources (Brown et al., 2020). Furthermore, women and children are more likely to die during disasters. In Sri Lanka, the 2004 Tsunami killed nearly one in five displaced women, more than twice the mortality rate of displaced men (UN). Sexual and gender-based violence, along with other human rights abuses, are likely to increase in the aftermath of disasters.

Women also tend to experience economic instability, exacerbated by a lack of access to information and resources, along with discrimination in employment and land rights. In Myanmar, 80% of the livestock lost to the 2015 floods belonged to women, according to the World Bank. Women in rural settings are often the primary providers of water, food, and energy in the household and community and are therefore highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, thus making them particularly susceptible to natural disasters.

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Amongst the key drivers of vulnerability are:

- Gender traditions, social structures and expectations, especially increases in unpaid care and household duties due to gender roles
- Preparation/capacity building for post disaster
- Access to humanitarian and economic resources, such as food, water, and financial aid
- Dependence on natural resources
- Reproductive roles and chances of survival
- Survival skills
- Safety at disaster relief centers and camps
- Gendered impact on professions
- Damage to infrastructure, such as housing, schools, and medical facilities

Two crucial challenges faced by women during disaster are access to and involvement in evacuation and rebuilding efforts. Due to the social norms and gendered roles, it is often the women that remain until the last minute before a disaster hits and are often averse to leaving their households. For example, women

may refuse to accept help from a male rescuer, as her religious custom does not allow her to interact with men who are not members of their households. In rebuilding, women also face restrictive gender norms. Following the Nepal earthquake, women were at the forefront of re-building houses and relief work, but had very little capacity or training to do so.

Women, therefore, are essential to disaster preparation, recovery, and long-term resilience.

KEY FINDINGS – CENTERING GENDER

According to the 2015 Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, the failure to recognize roles played by local civil society organizations and women and girls as partners “with valuable knowledge and experience” in resilience planning and recovery severely limits effectiveness in implementation. Yet women are frequently left out of such decision-making spaces.

Examples from South and Southeast Asia demonstrate a way forward. Following Cyclone Komen in Myanmar in 2015, the (then civilian-led) government leveraged both pre-existing disaggregated data and dedicated data collection with women and girls to develop a gender-responsive recovery strategy addressing the immediate needs of women and girls, along with the root causes of the disproportionate impact on them in disasters. Bangladesh, through its Cyclone Preparedness Program (CPP), has handpicked 40,000 women and trained them in disaster management. The CPP has also invested in coastal embankments, early warning systems, and newly planted forest resources.

In India’s southern Kerala state, 101 tribal youth were among the volunteers trained in disaster response by the Kerala Forest Research Institute and the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan—a grassroots-level organization giving rural youth avenues for skills development while contributing toward national service. Some of these tribal youths were living in hamlets more than 10 kilometers (6 miles) inside the forest, which are hard to access in times of disaster. Tribal populations in India are considered amongst the most vulnerable populations, so the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan in Indian states often work with the National Disaster Response Force to conduct trainings that empower select youth leaders from these communities to take immediate action before the NDRF’s arrival. Depending on the state, there are usually a mix of women and men volunteers, but there are no mandated numbers thus far.

In the aftermath of Nepal’s April 2015 earthquake, the nation passed the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2017, which recognized the need for a more decentralized approach to disaster response, including an increased role for women such as the appointment of women for their expertise in disaster management. Additionally, the Executive Committee of the National Council must also include the secretary of the women’s ministry. In this case women were at the forefront of re-building homes and relief work, but had very little capacity or training in these efforts at the time. And over the years there has been more focus on such capacity-building efforts.

That said, countries around the world—South Asia included—have room to improve their disaster response strategies and implementation to better serve vulnerable communities. Special policies are lacking for women’s post-disaster recovery and women’s involvement is limited to rescue forces. Social norms and gendered roles present a challenge for evacuations in South Asia, it is often the women that remain until the end and are averse to leaving their households. During discussions in the training one man noted that a woman refused to accept help from a male rescuer, as her religious custom did not allow her to interact with a man outside of her household.

CONCLUSION

Both WPS training sessions included opportunities for discussion, and the second-day session included scenarios in which participants were asked to plan for disaster response in a fictional remote area, sensitive to not only the needs of women and girls, but also cultural and religious considerations. Critiques of the sessions included that, more time for WPS was needed—two four-hour sessions were scheduled on back-to-back days. The training should have included the entire group (rather than just 20 people), and the training sessions should have had better gender balance—most of the 20 participants were women, though event organizers endeavored to assure that men from the different countries' disaster services were also included. Also, a delegation from India's disaster response forces had been expected to attend, but ultimately could not. That said, reception to the training was largely positive, with respondents saying that they came away with a broader perspective on how to respond to vulnerable populations, learned best practices from other countries, and will seek greater opportunities for women's decision-making in disaster response.

For more information, contact Rob York (rob@pacforum.org). This report reflects the views of the organizers; it is not a consensus document.