

Victims of fire – Understanding women's vulnerabilities in urban Bangladesh

Case Study

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DHAKA, Bangladesh – Fire hazards are a common phenomenon in city life. In Dhaka, approximately 8 million people crowd the streets, creating a human sea difficult to navigate. Coping with fire hazards in Dhaka dramatically differs from other mega-cities, as one blaze may destruct the path of vulnerable low-income areas within minutes.

Commonly, developed countries cope with these life threatening hazards by equipping buildings with tools such as smoke detectors that warn residents of possible fire outbreaks, fire extinguishers as well as clear 'Exit' signs and emergency staircases that are situated within an arm's reach. Whereas officials are working towards this in Dhaka, populations are still at risk of deadly fire hazards.

Within minutes, fires can burn buildings to the ground. It's within these initial moments when the blaze sets aflame that emergency responders need easy access to the fire site. In Dhaka, emergency responders' access to the fire site is a serious challenge as even pedestrians are known to get stuck in human traffic jams.

Dhaka's risk to set aflame

Electrical shorts, cigarette and mosquito coils burning, a forgotten pot atop a kitchen stove - these everyday mishaps put Dhaka at risk of setting aflame as communities live close, and households often lack preparedness measures. Household fires are responsible for the greatest loss of life and property in the urban areas in Bangladesh. On top of this, public squalors, areas where the most vulnerable reside, experience the most frequent number of unexpected fires each year.

Household accidents are not the only fire instigators. Warehouses with chemicals and other types of inflammable materials are commonly situated in residential and commercial areas in Dhaka. Furthermore, unauthorized electrical and gas pipeline connections can be found throughout the city.

Additionally, unplanned city growth has resulted in dense developments with narrow roads in some areas. In the event of a fire, it becomes very difficult for fire trucks to approach these areas. Unplanned city growth has also led to the development of congested low-income areas that are commonly constructed with materials that are easily flammable, allowing for the flame to sweep through communities without a notice.

There are many people in the city who lack fire safety knowledge, or the precautions one should take to prevent a fire at their home or workplace. Additionally, few know preventive measures a community should take to extinguish fires initially, before the fire trucks arrive.



Photo by Shamima Akhter

“ I heard screaming that night and saw the blaze. I used to live just beside that house. The house was locked from the outside.

The man of the house had left and locked the room due to security reasons. All of the other members of the household were sleeping at the time when the fire occurred. They were all burned, ”

one female participant recalled.



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Photo by Sayan Chuenudomsavad

Fires claim women's lives 'more frequently'

A pattern can be found among the victims of fire hazards in Dhaka; most of the victims are women and children. There are several reasons why women and children are generally more vulnerable than men to fire hazards. The primary role of a woman according to Bangladeshi cultural values is to be a mother and caregiver of a family. She is responsible for taking care of the household at all times. Even during a fire hazard, women have to take responsibility of the household, other family members and belongings. This extra responsibility slows their evacuation process and as a result sometimes they are not able to escape from the fire.

Moreover, according to Bangladeshi culture's clothing practice, it is standard for women to wear a 'Sharee'. It is hard to run wearing the traditional Sharee, adding reasons why women are less able to escape fires. Also, there is no proper system to warn people of possible fire incidents in Bangladesh. Generally, women who are inside the house do not get information about nearby fire hazards. By the time they hear news of the fire, it is too late for them to evacuate.

Recalling recent incidents

There have been several incidents of fire in Dhaka's recent past. In Ward 47 (Jafrabad Area), there was a significant fire hazard in 2011, at the Bottola Polpar slum area. The fire started at night due to an electric short circuit (ADPC Field Data was collected on 27/9/12). It was reported that five people were killed in that fire. Four of the five were women and one was a child. The fire destroyed about 700 - 800 slum shelters.

Recently, early on the morning of 18 November 2012 (*Daily Star* - 19 November 12), in Boubazar, a fire took the lives of eleven people. Out of the eleven victims six were women and the rest were children. Some of these women were not able to escape because they could not bear to leave their children. The men could escape because they jumped from the high wall boundary enclosing the area. On the other hand women could not because of the small children on their laps.



Photo by Sayan Chuenudomsavad

Recognizing the importance of women in fire safety

Women play an important role in the development of Bangladesh. It is important to ensure that women are safely rescued in the event of a fire hazard. Since kitchen fires are one of the most common causes of fire, training should be provided to women to ensure that they are aware of the potential causes of a kitchen fire.

Basic training should also be provided to women on their reactions during the event of a fire. To increase safety awareness of fire incidents, educational materials informing people about the causes of fire hazards and the 'do's and don'ts' during a fire should be disseminated in each community and included in school curriculum. Additionally, this type of information can be published in print media and broadcasted in multimedia to impact a wider audience.



ADPC's Contribution

Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) is working on the issue of vulnerabilities of women in fires, through various projects in Bangladesh. Some of ADPC's activities in Bangladesh that deal with fire and the vulnerabilities of women include:

- Under the Comprehensive Disaster Management Project ADPC is conducting a ward based risk profile in different cities that include Dhaka (25 wards), Chittagong (15 wards) and Sylhet (10 wards). Based on community discussions that included both male and female participants and secondary data review, ADPC prepared ward level risk profiles. Fire hazard is considered as one of the most risky hazards in urban areas. Data revealed that women are highly exposed to the risks of fire hazard.
- Formulation of Ward-level Disaster Management Committees (WDMC): Members of the committee consist of different occupation groups and notably include women representatives.
- Based on ward-level risk priority, ADPC is preparing technical hazard maps, evacuation route design for first responder agencies as well as community volunteers.
- WDMC includes women volunteers for urban fire hazard response. In the Bangladeshi culture women have easier access to the household sphere. From a preparedness perspective, it is easier for women to help other women. In this way, ADPC considers local cultural values when conducting fire hazard preparedness.
- ADPC is conducting mock drill sessions in wards in different cities with the full participation of community members including women representatives. As people would experience simulated fire hazards through role-play, the mock drill sessions will increase awareness among communities.
- When preparing the comprehensive contingency plan for fire hazard, ADPC gave a high priority to women's vulnerability.
- ADPC held national level consultation among different stakeholders to prioritize the vulnerability of women and people with special needs.



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