

Fighting fate with skill and practice

Case Study

March 2014

DHAKA, Bangladesh – Oblivious of the consequences, the house owners of Bangshal community in Bangladesh allow tenants to store inflammable materials and chemicals on the ground floors of their old multi-storey houses, stood on each side of narrow alleys, which provide little space for escape should a disaster occur.

“Most of the families inherited these houses and then built additional floors for earning money through rentals,” says Mr. Sajudul Rehman, a local leader of Bangshal.

Bangshal is a residential-cum-commercial hub located in the southern part of Dhaka, popularly known as old Dhaka. It is a cheap market both for the wholesalers and retailers with approximately seven thousand varieties of shops of raw materials and finished goods. The main bazar of Bangshal consists of shops selling a range of products such as bicycles, spare parts, plastic products, chemicals, construction material, rubber products, fabric, mattresses, and paints.

Most of the houses, located just off the main market and deep into narrow rear alley, serve as storages for hazardous materials, and a place for plastic recycling and shoe assembling. Ignorant of the danger, labourers sit in small, low ceiling and cage-like rooms with insufficient ventilation, and expertly stick rubber soles to shoes with highly flammable glue. In case of a fire incident, safe evacuation seems impossible.

Mr. Mahmud Khan Biju, a resident of Bangshal suggests for structural changes, as some of the alleys are so narrow at certain points that they are not walkable for two persons at a time.

“People are bound to live in the area mainly due to their livelihood and also other nearby safer areas are expensive”, he says. Mr. Biju is also concerned about the probability of the slow response in case of an emergency such as a fire or an earthquake.

Wedding songs turned into screams

The fear of fire eruption and slow response from the authorities are not mere assumptions. There have been accidents and loss of lives due to fire and building collapse in nearby areas in the past.

“We used to blame fate for each and every unfortunate incident until I lost twelve family members in a fire that engulfed the entire building in 2010, located only seventeen kilometres away from Bangshal,” lamented



Photo by Jorg Hackemann / Shutterstock.com
Many houses in Dhaka have insufficient ventilation and are impossible to evacuate during a fire hazard.



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Mr. Sajudul Rehman and Mr. Mahmud Khan Biju tour the homes of Bangshal. Reducing fire risk in such houses is an important step in reducing vulnerability to disasters.

Mr. Muhammad Hussain while narrating the horrific incident, which made news headlines as the Nimtoli tragedy.

As many as 123 people were burnt to death and over two hundred received serious injuries in the deadly fire, triggered by an electrical transformer explosion and fanned by chemicals stored on the ground floor of a residential building in old Dhaka on the night of 3 June 2010. The fire erupted at a house where a wedding party was being held. It engulfed the surrounding buildings within no time.

At the occasion of the third anniversary of the Nimtoli tragedy, national media highlighted the issue yet again. Dhaka Mirror, a national daily, noted that many buildings at Nabab Katra, Bangshal, Siddique Bazar, Sat Rowza, Babu Bazar and Armanitola still house factories with flammable objects on their ground floors.

“These media reports are correct. The house that caught fire where my cousin was getting married belonged to my aunt. We were supposed to participate in

the celebrations that night but my father fell sick and we postponed the visit to next day,” says Mr. Hussain adding that Bangshal is no different from Nimtoli in terms of land-use planning and types of hazards. “Speedy response is not possible in this area. Ambulances cannot access the victims if something happens off the main bazar,” he says.

Dr. Maliha Alam, who attended to the victims of Nimtoli tragedy at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, says that a quick transportation of the fire victims was the most crucial factor at that time.

“Unfortunately, Nimtoli is quite a congested area due to which it was hard for the ambulances to access the location. Tricycles, locally known as rickshaw-vans, proved to be the most efficient means of transporting the victims. A number of patients were brought to the ambulances and to the hospitals by the brave drivers of tricycles,” recalls Dr. Maliha who is also an instructor of the Hospital Preparedness for Emergency (HOPE) training course run by Asian Disaster

Preparedness Center in Bangladesh.

Bangshal community took the warning

The Nimtoli tragedy carried with it a degree of warning for Bangshal population. They wanted to acquire locally available skills of emergency response, especially for fire hazards. They knew their options were quite limited. Leaving the area, changing livelihood, and introducing structural measures for fire mitigation seemed quite difficult if not impractical.

Nevertheless, they came into contact with ADPC and took the opportunity to build their emergency response capacities. ADPC, together with the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and the Fire Services and Civil Defence, helped train twenty-one volunteers through Community Action for Disaster Response (CADRE) training under the Program for Enhancement of Emergency Response (PEER) in 2013.

CADRE training courses aim to enable



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CADRE training courses aim to enable local residents in Bangladesh to become first responders to the unexpected incidents related to fire, water and health emergencies.

local residents to become first responders to the unexpected incidents related to fire, water and health emergencies through technical and practical exercises.

CADRE training was not only a means of imparting technical skills to volunteers from Bangshal, but it also helped change the community's risk perception. Earlier, fatalism seemed to dominate as they thought their fate had been sealed by the *Almighty* and there was nothing much they could do about the surrounding dangers. After CADRE's interventions, they felt more confident about their own capabilities and the key role that they can play for saving lives in emergencies. In effect, it was the transformation of a training activity into a useful advocacy and awareness campaign on hazard prevention and mitigation.

CADRE graduates are trying to convince house owners not to allow tenants store hazardous material on their ground floors.

"For us, the lives of our families and sources of income are at risk. For the

tenants, it is a matter of their livelihood alone. We have started putting in efforts for saving both by taking the tenants and others on-board," says Mr. Biju.

From first responders to advocates of emergency prevention

As part of their awareness campaign, CADRE volunteers go door-to-door and talk about the fire hazard and its prevention. They also organize capacity building sessions for the community including women on fire hazard mitigation.

"We believe engaging women in the process is of paramount importance. We have trained both men and women by adapting sections on fire prevention from CADRE's manual," shares Mr. Sajudul Rehman proudly.

CADRE volunteers have also started developing a database of potential blood-donors with information on their blood-group organized in an orderly manner for ease of use, which enables them to contact the right person in

case of an emergency. Interestingly, the community has displayed emergency contact numbers at thirty-five different points through wall chalking.

At the beginning of the CADRE initiative, it was only about the identified community volunteers. But, as time passed by, the volunteers grew in numbers. They now include house owners, tenants, women and youths of the area who have been spreading the message of fire prevention and mitigation across Bangshal.



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