Rekha Begum and Most Shirin Akhter live in Pashchim Udakhali village, Bangladesh, an area which experiences typhoons and frequent cyclical flooding. As women and mothers living in a disaster-prone community, they both face significant unpaid care work burdens. But their experiences and understanding of these responsibilities vary significantly, due to their different levels of engagement with sensitisation and unpaid care norm-changes. In spite of these differences, both women are pushing through the unpaid care work barriers to become leaders and drive resilience and DRR activities in their communities.

Positive outcomes for the community

Because of the sensitisation work on unpaid care, male community members have become more aware about women’s roles and contribution to the family. They are much more supportive to their spouses and try to help their wives, supporting them by taking on some of the unpaid care work such as washing, cooking, collecting firewood and water. The social norm of only women doing unpaid care work is slowly changing, with the community realising that this is also ‘work’ and that it is both valuable to the community and causes a barrier for women engaging in other activities. As a result of the paradigm shift, women in the community have more time to do income-generating work and to engage socially. The Bonna Nari Dall women’s group has greater influence because its members are more able to contribute to its activities, including building resilience in the community, for example training families to keep dry food in case of emergency, harvest rice earlier in heavy flood years, and secure all necessary belongings six months before the flood season. The women are also able to maintain advocacy work with the local government in an effort to fix the damaged dam. The redistribution of some unpaid care among men in the community means that they have more time to travel and continue this advocacy, which is vital for the whole community.

But changing embedded social norms takes a long time. For Shirin, who is experiencing this new way of thinking for the first time, she is just starting to take the first steps on a long path to a new mind-set which no longer binds her value and achievements solely to the home. For Rekha, in comparison, years of engagement with ActionAid and the women in her community have enabled her to become a strong advocate for women’s empowerment. And this, in turn, has caused her to flourish and grow in confidence. While in the past, because of the communities’ perception of her as a caregiver, Rekha’s social position was reduced, now she has regained respect among her peers. “As I am a leader of women, I have got back my honour,” she says.

Women Overcoming Unpaid Care Work to Lead Resilience: A Series of Inspiring Case Studies

Case Study 1

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Bangladesh

A tale of two women overcoming unpaid care work and leading preparedness: Rekha Begum and Most Shirin Akhter

Rekha Begum and Most Shirin Akhter live in Pashchim Udakhali village, Bangladesh, an area which experiences typhoons and frequent cyclical flooding. As women and mothers living in a disaster-prone community, they both face significant unpaid care work burdens. But their experiences and understanding of these responsibilities vary significantly, due to their different levels of engagement with sensitisation and unpaid care norm-changes. In spite of these differences, both women are pushing through the unpaid care work barriers to become leaders and drive resilience and DRR activities in their communities.

Perspectives of unpaid care

Most Shirin Akhter is responsible for all her family’s unpaid care work, including looking after her two children, making it difficult for her to engage in the community. Because of the sensitisation work on unpaid care, male community members have become more aware about women’s roles and contribution to the family. They are much more supportive to their spouses and try to help their wives, supporting them by taking on some of the unpaid care work such as washing, cooking, collecting firewood and water. The social norm of only women doing unpaid care work is slowly changing, with the community realising that this is also ‘work’ and that it is both valuable to the community and causes a barrier for women engaging in other activities. As a result of the paradigm shift, women in the community have more time to do income-generating work and to engage socially. The Bonna Nari Dall women’s group has greater influence because its members are more able to contribute to its activities, including building resilience in the community, for example training families to keep dry food in case of emergency, harvest rice earlier in heavy flood years, and secure all necessary belongings six months before the flood season. The women are also able to maintain advocacy work with the local government in an effort to fix the damaged dam. The redistribution of some unpaid care among men in the community means that they have more time to travel and continue this advocacy, which is vital for the whole community.

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She feels guilty if she does other things with her time, and believes that she should stay in her home, because there she is able to do all the unpaid care work for her family.

44-year-old Rekha Begum faced the same high burden of care as a mother with three children, but her situation got much worse when her husband suffered a stroke in 2005. His illness required treatment which drained the family’s savings, and left him paralysed and needing constant care. The family’s cattle were sold and farmland mortgaged, so Rekha was left in a very vulnerable economic position on top of her vast unpaid care burdens. Because there was no money for schooling, Rekha had to send her two sons to work in factories in Chittagong and Dhaka. Rekha’s days start with Morning Prayer at dawn, and then she sweeps her house, washes dishes, cooks rice, cleans her husband, gives him medicine, and feeds him. Then she washes clothes and takes a shower herself, before finishing cooking lunch. She helps her husband to have a shower and feeds him again. She also has to make time to collect firewood. Rekha then spends time massaging her husband’s body and doing physiotherapy exercises. In between all of this unpaid care work, Rekha makes a small income to support her family and pay for her husband’s medication by cooking a local food called chanachur to sell. Although she faces a very high burden of unpaid care, Rekha has found time to engage in activities in her community, becoming a strong female leader.

During last year’s flood, Rekha had to pay to rent a boat that could take her paralyzed husband to her sister’s home in another village. All her hens and ducks died in the water. Shirin was a little luckier, able to send her cattle to her brother’s house and install a shelf to keep her hens and ducks safe, even though their house was inundated with two feet of water.

The enormous burden of unpaid care work causes both women to have limited time to relax, socialise, or explore their own economic and educational growth, let alone engage in community activities. Especially when a disaster hits, the overwhelming need to care for their own family and make sure their dependents are safe is a barrier to supporting the wider community. The women’s group, Bonna Nari Dall, is working to share messages around disaster prevention, and to promote a more resilient community. For example, last year when they came to know that the nearby dam was damaged, Rekha and the group tried to share warnings with the community, as well as advocating to the local government, sending demands to fix the dam. But because of the needs of their family and increased burden of unpaid care in flooding season, it was hard for the group to reach the most remote community members, or to keep up the consistent advocacy needed to enact change in the local government.

Over the last year, ActionAid Bangladesh has scaled up work with Bonna Nari Dall as part of the “POWER” project, focusing on activities which aim to understand and reduce the burden of unpaid care. Sensitisation meetings with religious and community leaders, market management committees, and local men and boys raised awareness around the issue. The community was mobilised to challenge social norms which cause unfair distribution of unpaid care. Men and women filled in ‘Time Diaries’, which showed how much unpaid care work was done each day by women versus men, making the community aware of the disparity of this burden.

In response, community member Ramcharan Das said “prior to participating in the spouse and sensitization meetings on unpaid care work, I never assisted my wife, because I believed that unpaid care work is only the responsibility of women. So there were misunderstandings and conflict. After attending the spouse meeting I understood about unpaid care work and now I assist my wife. Now she has some time to engage in paid work such as farming, and she can earn her own money.”

Another community member, Md. Rashidul Islam, said “before my wife got involved in the POWER project, she was not allowed to go outside. Now I do not stop her from going anywhere, because I understood from our spouse meeting and the Time Diary that she has the right to go anywhere, and she can engage with paid work to earn money. She also holds the same rights as me to send the money she earns on her own.”

Technical and service solutions were also discussed, with a child day care centre opening for small children. Some couples decided to allocate resources to purchase electric rice cookers to reduce time spent cooking. In addition, the introduction of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture techniques also supported families to get better long-term food and nutritional yield with less time needed in their gardens.

One cause of the two women’s differing perspective on unpaid care is Rekha’s long engagement with a local women’s group, ‘Bonna Nari Dall’, of which she has been President since 2007. One of the group’s aims, in collaboration with its partner ActionAid Bangladesh, is to undertake activities aimed at understanding and reducing the burden of unpaid care through sensitisation and advocacy activities. Shirin is also involved in the group – she has been its Vice President since 2016 – but she is a much newer member, and it is clear that change which challenges embedded social norms takes time. Shirin is still finding it hard to shake the idea that she has the duty to be solely responsible for her family’s care.

The impact of disasters

The village where both women live, Pashchim Udakhalia, is disaster-prone, facing typhoons and severe rainfall, as well as the impacts of a damaged nearby dam, leading to cyclical but unpredictable floods. Frequent severe flooding causes massive losses for the community, destroying property, belongings, livestock, farmland, trees, food and furniture. Sometimes the water level rises to the height of a person’s shoulder. As well as impacting the community economically, these incidents of disaster increase the unpaid care burden, particularly on women, who have to keep their children and dependents safe, and deal with the loss of food, clean water, and facilities for doing unpaid care work.

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1. POWER (Promoting Opportunities for Women’s Empowerment and Rights) is a five-year ActionAid programme working in Ghana, Rwanda, Pakistan and Bangladesh aiming to achieve women’s economic empowerment through tackling unpaid care work and promoting Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture.