



Satu, a determined advocate for gender in the community

The district of Patharghata, at the extreme end of the coastal belt of Bangladesh, is not only one of the most vulnerable areas to cyclones and tidal surges but it is also located in a very conservative part of the country. This combination has led to an unacceptable price in lives paid by young girls of the surrounding villages during cyclones. When a cyclone is about to hit the coast of Bangladesh, the community-based early warning system enters into action to mobilize all villagers and organize movement to the nearest cyclone shelters. Because of lack of awareness of local authorities on gender and child protection, the shelters are not a safe place for young girls: poor lighting, no separation of sleeping spaces and latrines, and absence of a security system all combine to create an environment where abuses are widespread. Many fathers prefer to leave their young girls at home, completely exposed to the winds and tidal surges, rather than risk taking them to the shelters.

Satu is well aware of this reality. A 14 year old girl and a student of class IX, she has already experienced two major cyclones in her lifetime. She recalls that when she took shelter in the school-cum-shelter close to her home with all the surrounding villagers, it was a very uncomfortable time for her and the other women and young girls. “In the shelter, I and other girls were repeatedly harassed by groups of boys, but when I complained to the leader, he did not listen to me”. She also observed discrimination against women and girls in the distribution of relief items and emergency services, which were always managed by men. Satu does not want to have to choose between her safety and her dignity: “it is not fair that some girls are left behind because their families are too scared to take them to the shelters”.

From the day she has been enrolled as a student brigade member in the CBDRR project, Satu has been waiting for the opportunity to raise her concerns to the authorities of her Union and to finally be heard. The CBDRR project works with communities to better understand and plan around the risks they face. In doing so, the project emphasizes the participation of women, children and people with disability as being the most at-risk groups when a disaster hits. In October 2009, Satu represented the students in a Risk Assessment and Planning workshop organized by the CBDRR project in coordination with the local authorities of her Union. Not only did Satu share her preoccupations with the assembly, but she insisted that her recommendations towards enhancing the protection and participation of girls be included in the official Risk Reduction Action Plan and demanded to become a permanent member of her Union Disaster Management Committee – the mandated body for shelter and emergency response management at local level.



With continuous support from the CBDRR team, Satu is now a full member of her Union Disaster Management Committee and a powerful advocate for the rights of women in disasters.

About the Donor: DIPECHO

The CBDRR project is funded by the European Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid – DG ECHO and co-funded by Cordaid. DG ECHO has set up DIPECHO (which stands for Disaster Preparedness ECHO) to improve the capacities of communities at risk to better prepare and protect themselves from natural disasters. The fifth DIPECHO Action Plan for South Asia was launched in 2009 with the principal objective to support strategies that enable local communities and institutions to better prepare for, mitigate and respond adequately to natural disasters by enhancing their capacities to cope and respond, thereby increasing resilience and reducing vulnerability.