

A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with a weathered face, wearing a red and gold patterned headscarf. She has a red tilak on her forehead and a gold nose ring. The background is blurred.

# WOMEN AS PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

*Collating stories of women  
combating risk and their road to resilience*

# Women in Disaster

Sadhukuti village of Lowairpoa block under Karimganj district is witnessing a change in the community dynamics, with women actively engaging with village development institutions. A group of women have ventured out of the four walls of their house to work for the cause of their community and reduce the menace of floods. A total of 15 women have constituted a committee in the village to facilitate the process of identifying beneficiaries and monitoring the development work undertaken by the Early Recovery project supported by HCL Foundation. The all women committee is equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills and have the dedication to bring about the intended change in the community. Together these women have identified and facilitated the cash support and livelihood assistance to 75 most marginalized families in their locality.

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Earlier I didn't have the courage to move out of the house without my husband. But somewhere I wanted to involve myself into social work and contribute towards the development of our village. I gave my name in the Beneficiary selection committee make myself engaged and that makes me self-motivated, and I am also lucky enough that my husband allows me to do whatever I want to do.

- Dipti Rekha Baidya, Member in  
Beneficiary Selection Committee,  
Karimganj.

Recurrent disasters have intensely compounded the existing social vulnerability of people across South Asia, among which women seem to bear the major brunt. Women are perceived as the most vulnerable group in a disaster situation owing to the societal norms and cultural conditioning prevalent in the Indian context. Economic factors accentuate the vulnerability of women by limiting access to resources which facilitate an early recovery from the impending shocks and stress. Lack of decision making power also reinforce the impact of disaster on women thereby isolating them from disaster planning and preparedness activities. Disasters further add to the women's domestic workload, which is unaccounted most of the time, further adding to their household drudgery, magnifying mental and emotional stress and trauma.

Though women have been active in disaster response, however mainstream trends have largely portrayed them as victims. Their role in disaster risk management have been largely masqueraded with dominant male centric narratives with regard to institutional planning and mitigation measures. In recent years, Caritas India has brought gender considerations in its early recovery and risk reduction programs by incorporating means to address the underlying causes of vulnerability and efforts to bring gender parity in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

## Our Approach:

Caritas India recognizes the need to address the varying causes which shape up the vulnerability of people and structures causing their disintegration. CI interventions have promoted systematic participation of women in emergency response and recovery through the following ways:

**Embedding the perspective of empowerment animation, one of its key strategic pillars, in Disaster Risk Reduction** CI ensures that women become active change agents and launch collective actions to challenge the fundamental causes driving them into vulnerability. Under this process women in disaster affected areas of the country have organized themselves into informal institutions and participated in formal bodies to influence decision making in their community and improvise upon their skills to negotiate for power and representation, bringing lasting changes in the community. In Karimganj district, promoting women leaders have paved the way for greater inclusion of women at the village level. These women have emerged as role models for the community and are considered as changemakers, having surpassed the traditional gender divide and gained a common platform to participate in decision making with men.





**F**ostering the participation of women in village planning exercise and their partnership with the local governance institutions to present village risk reduction plans and advocate for women's issue has been an empowering process for the womenfolk and bridged the gap in addressing the differential needs of the women in times of disaster. Women generally have a better understanding of the resources available in the community and the household, and their inherent family instincts enables them to identify the needs of the different sections of the population, thereby outlining a broader, inclusive and effective disaster planning. Caritas India has actively involved women in mapping exercises in the village, facilitating them in analysing their vulnerability and identifying sustainable mechanisms.

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During the monsoon season we have to trudge past the marshy lands across the river to reach our fields; it takes a lot of time and is dangerous. During the risk mapping we marked this area as a risk prone area and to solve this issue we had collectively approached MLA sahib, requesting him to construct a bridge. We are hopeful that one day our demands will be met.

- Kamala Passi, Brahmachari, Bihar

*In the state of Bihar, women from Brahmachari village under Lagma Panchayat have approached the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) of Bhagalpur constituency with their request to construct a bridge over the Kuwa river which would ease their communication to the neighbouring villages.*





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Earlier I could weave only 5 Mekhela Sador in a year but this year I managed to weave upto 15 Sadors, thanks to this new concept. Now you can hear the traditional clatter of the loom even during peak flooding months

- Renumai Misong, Sissisumoni Village, Dhemaaji

**P**romoting community managed DRR through information and knowledge sharing, CI works towards increasing the awareness of women and enhance their preparedness in an effort to address their economic vulnerability. Capacitating women with improved skills and better technologies have opened avenues for integrating Indigenous Traditional knowledge with Conventional Science which have catalysed their income during the lean season, contributing to food and nutritional security and better socio-economic status in the community. Vision building exercises oriented the participants on the potential income opportunities based on their skills and interest.

*Located at a distance of 45 kilometres from the district headquarters, Sissisumoni village displays a stoical acceptance to the sufferings caused by annual floods and river bank erosions. A chronically flood prone area, Sissisumoni and its neighbouring village in Machkhowa block remains inundated for half the year resulting in breakdown of agriculture and loss of traditional livelihoods. Activities like weaving are brought to an abrupt halt as the traditional throw shuttle looms built under the stilt are completely submerged under water during that period, thereby reducing the number of working days in a year and restricting their efficacy. This further deters the women's ability to channelize their weaving skill towards income generating activities.*



**S**treamlining women led recovery programs which ensure the restoration and continuity of health, nutrition and livelihood and serve towards the holistic development of the local communities in North East and Southern States has been a priority in the post disaster recovery projects. Strategies such as input support and access to market services have been incorporated to build upon the adaptive capacity of the women, leverage networking and linkage with technical institutions and line departments to nurture and support women to address the post disaster livelihood constraints.

Under the livelihood recovery programme in Kerala post the massive flood in 2018, Caritas India through its partners supported 312 women on enterprise development programme. A group of 18 women from Ernakulam district formed a Joint Liability Group named Anugraha and initiated a Candle Making Unit which started functioning from May 15, 2019. Presently they are producing an average of 1000 candles per week. Recently they got an order for 100 packets of candle (40 gram size). The candles are easily sold locally. Each one is earning an income of Rs. 300/- per day. In due course they have plans to expand the business and thereby generate better income.



[ In Bhadrak district of Odisha, women from 2 SHGs were trained on the process of preparing phenyl with necessary precaution measures. At present both the groups have prepared 400 liters of phenyl each, and identified potential markets in two nearby schools in Bhadrak town and 3 shops in Pirahat market. As of date, only one SHG has sold a stock of 100 litres at the rate of Rs. 35 per litre against the input cost of Rs. 30 per litre earning the group a profit of of Rs. 500. ]

**C**aritas India has been working to generate a pool of informed volunteers, who have been trained to act as First Responders in emergency situations involving them in search and rescue, first aid, evacuation and early warning. Women between the age of 18–45 years make up 30% of the First responder Groups also known as Task Force in the community. These women have been key players in mobilizing the community to ensure safe storage of documents, food items, potable water, firewood and other basic necessities besides disseminating early warning information in the community.



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I never realized my right to participate and my potential to contribute in disaster response. However the training on First Aid and Search & Rescue conducted in our village helped me make informed decisions and systematic interventions in disaster situations. I have learnt the basics of bandaging, preparing makeshift stretcher and significance of WASH during emergency.

- Ratna Devi, member of Village Disaster Management Committee of Ratuwa 2, Malda district.

**Promoting Gender Just Humanitarian Workforce: Adhering to UNDRR's vision to achieve gender parity by 2026, Caritas India is proactively engages in promoting gender parity in workforce. Through these efforts, we intend to project equal representation of men and women in programmes and front line operations. Women staff are encouraged to take an active lead in managing and facilitating emergency and development projects, giving them an equal platform for decision making. By involving women staff and volunteers in project inception, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities, CI has ensured mainstreaming gender sensitivity throughout the project cycle and the organizational process. Over the years, CI has witnessed a substantial increase in female workforce especially in the Emergency Response & DRR desk from a completely male dominated profession, to a male and female ratio of 40 : 60 at present. In the coming years, CI envisages strong participation of women to foster a gendered lens across its disaster risk reduction projects, resilience program and climate change adaptation initiatives, accelerating the attainment of the seven global targets under Sendai Framework and strengthening commitment towards Sustainable Development Goal.**

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I feel, becoming a woman leader in humanitarian sector means making an intentional decisions and taking risks. Women make up a large number of those who risk their own lives to save others. They are often the first to respond and the last to leave. Their role in this sector is very essential as that promotes the basics of gender. Humanitarian response affects genders differently and to break the social engineering in which we live in our communities, women as leaders in emergencies is very important.

- Pooja Rana, Assistant Manager, ER-DRR,  
Caritas India



## Conclusion

There is an understanding that disasters affect gender disproportionately, and women's involvement particularly across emergency response and DRR have remained largely an untapped asset. DRR is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, and requires crosscutting interventions across different sectors – socio-economic, cultural, environmental and political. Acknowledgment of this has prompted Caritas India to spearhead programs to empower women and strengthen their voices not only at the decision making levels but also have manifested into women mobilizing into task force for actual response and recovery activities. The likelihood of probable knowledge gap, prejudice and the pre-conceived ideas with which both the government and non-government agencies go for response into the field have been reduced significantly now that women are informed and abled to identify their own needs and interest areas. Caritas India calls upon every stakeholder to come together in solidarity, support and promote inclusive engagement to build a resilient community.