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# BEYOND BARRIERS

**BANGLADESH CASE STUDY:**  
WOMEN-LED EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM

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**September 2024**

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This case study is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Concern Worldwide and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. The case study reflects the views and perspectives of the research participants, not those of Concern Worldwide and its research partners.

# GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In June 2022, Bangladesh was hit by a devastating flood in Sylhet division that caused widespread destruction, displacing thousands of people and leaving them in dire need of emergency assistance. Among the affected communities were women, who often face unique challenges and vulnerabilities during disasters.

ActionAid Bangladesh, a leading international humanitarian organization with a strong focus on gender equality and women's empowerment, quickly mobilized its Women-led emergency response (WLER) team to provide life-saving support to the affected communities. What made their response stand out was the central role played by women in leading the efforts. ActionAid Bangladesh has a long-standing commitment to empowering women and promoting gender equality in all of its programs. They recognize that women have unique knowledge, skills, and perspective that can be invaluable in emergencies. As such, they have prioritized the leadership and participation of women in their emergency response efforts since 2013.

When the disaster struck, ActionAid Bangladesh's WLER team immediately swung into action. Women volunteers, who were trained in disaster response and risk reduction, quickly conducted needs assessments to identify the most pressing needs of women and girls in the affected communities. They collaborated closely with the local women leaders and community members to develop and implement response plans that were gender-sensitive, culturally appropriate, and inclusive.

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The WLER team focused on addressing a wide range of needs, including food, water, shelter, health, hygiene, and protection. They set up safe spaces for women and girls, where they could access essential services, receive psychosocial support, and share their experiences and concerns. They also provided hygiene kits, menstrual hygiene supplies, and other essential items specifically tailored to the needs of women and girls. The WLER team actively engaged with local authorities, humanitarian actors, and other stakeholders to advocate for the rights and needs of women and girls. They raised awareness about the specific challenges faced by women in emergencies, such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and unequal access to resources and services. They called for gender-responsive policies and practices to be integrated into all aspects of the emergency response. Through their efforts, the WLER team made a significant impact on the lives of women and girls in the affected communities. They ensured that women's voices were heard, their needs were met, and their rights were protected. They also demonstrated that women can be effective leaders in emergency response, bringing unique perspectives and solutions to complex challenges.

As the emergency response phase transitioned into recovery and rehabilitation, the WLER team continued to prioritize the empowerment of women and girls. They collaborated with local communities to build their resilience to future disasters by strengthening their disaster preparedness, risk reduction, and response capacities. They also continued to advocate for gender equality and women's rights, addressing the root causes of gender-based vulnerabilities and discrimination.

In recognition of their exemplary efforts, the WLER team received widespread acclaim from the affected communities, local authorities, humanitarian partners, and other stakeholders. Their innovative and inclusive approach to the emergency response set a new standard for gender-responsive humanitarian action and inspired others to follow suit.

In the aftermath of the flood, the WLER demonstrated the power of women's leadership in building resilient and inclusive communities. By prioritizing gender equality and women's empowerment, they were able to effectively respond to the unique needs and challenges faced by women and girls in emergencies and contribute to their long-term recovery and resilience. Their story serves as a shining example of how women's leadership can make a positive difference in humanitarian action and inspire others to adopt similar approaches in emergencies.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- By prioritizing the leadership and participation of women in emergency response, the WLER was able to ensure responses were gender sensitive, culturally appropriate and inclusive.
- Having established the WLER for emergency response, the empowerment of women and girls was prioritized as the emergency phase transitioned into the recovery phase.
- The work of the WLER is an example of how essential it is to consider the needs of all members of the community in locally led responses. This approach can and should be applied to other marginalized groups such as People with Disabilities (PWD).



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