

Vulnerability of Women in Natural Calamities in Kenya: The Bunyala Floods Experiences

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Abstract

Floods, like any other disasters, cause a great deal of human suffering especially to the vulnerable members of the society. In Kenya floods are perennial and affect thousands of people. The worst affected areas are the low lands of the five major drainage basins. Bunyala sub-county which lies in the Lake Victoria basin, experiences perennial floods due to overtopping of Rivers Nzoia and Yala at their lower reaches near Lake Victoria. These floods are accompanied by massive destruction of socio-cultural and economic activities of the inhabitants. The most vulnerable and the most affected are women since they do not only carry the burden of feeding for their families but also take care of the affected relatives. This study examined the social impacts of floods on women in Bunyala sub-county.

Key words: Disasters, Floods, social wellbeing, vulnerability,

INTRODUCTION

Floods are extreme events of weather variability that occur when there is significant excess amount of water over a relatively short period causing inundation on land that is not normally submerged (Ayoade, 1988; Ojany and Ogendo, 1973). Increased variations in climatic conditions in the last half of the twentieth century have led to remarkable flooding episodes (Ngaira, 1999). In terms of severity and loss of life floods were rated third, after tropical cyclone and earthquakes, globally between 1947 and 1980. More than 160 major floods were recorded between 1980 and 1985 causing deaths or injuring more than 120,000 people, destroyed about 20 million houses and caused damage estimated at over US \$ 20 million (Houghton, 1997). And yet the number of people affected by floods has been increasing unabated. In South America, for instance, the number rose from 5.2 million per year in 1960s to 15.4 million per year in 1970s while in India the number of lives lost in 1950s was fourteen times greater in 1980s (Clerke, 1991; Cohen and Miller, 2001).

Floods are not new phenomena in Kenya particularly in the low lying areas of the country as they are associated with the majority of disasters (Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Drought Monitoring Centre, Nairobi (DMCN), 2002). The prevalence rates in stands at 27% and affects 5% of all the population affected by disasters in Kenya (Otiende, 2009). Major floods have been experienced in 1937, 1947, 1951, 1957-58, 1961, 1977-78, 1997-98, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2013 out of which the 1997-98 and 2003 floods were declared as national disasters. Most floods occur immediately after the droughts triggering humanitarian crisis. Women, who carry most of the family burdens in Kenya, are usually the most affected by floods and other natural calamities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study was to examine the impact of floods on social well being of women in Bunyala sub-county, Busia County in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA

Data for the study was obtained using a triangulation method which involved the use of different technique such as interviews, questionnaires, personal observation and collection of documented information. Respondents were selected using simple random sampling technique while the key informants were purposively sampled.

Bunyala sub-county is in Busia County in western Kenya covers an area of about 306.5 square kilometers of which 120 square kilometers is under water (Figure 1). The sub-county receives between 760 mm and 1,015 mm of rain annually (GOK, 2002). River Nzoia bisects the area into the southern and northern parts. In the southernmost parts lies Yala swamp. Despite low and erratic rainfall, the area experiences annual floods, which results from overtopping of River Nzoia in its lower reaches and the expansion of the Yala Swamp (LBDA, 2003). Thus, floods are majorly caused by heavy rainfall in the upper catchments of Rivers Nzoia and Yala.

The sub-county has a total population of 66,723 persons. Male to female ratio stands at 48:52 with the total number of males being 32,028 and that of female being 34,695. The female population (15-59 years), which is the childbearing age, forms 23% of the total population. The district labour force is absorbed by the agricultural sector, commerce, trade and fishing since industrial sector is not well developed. Women generally provide the bulk of the labour that cultivates the land for agricultural production (GOK, 2002).

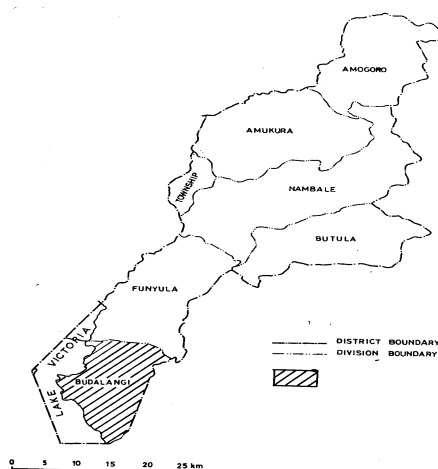


Figure 1: Location of Bunyala sub-county

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although male jingoism dominated human lifestyles in Bunyala sub-county, women assumed the greatest role in socioeconomic development. Most of the family burdens such as farming, taking care of the sick and the aged, upbringing of children and income generation were carried out by women. During flooding periods therefore, women were most vulnerable to the disaster in a number of ways as explained in the section that follows.

Girl child education

Education level in Bunyala sub-county was generally low due to low enrolment and high school dropout rate. On the basis of national examinations performance, academic standards were quite low with most school facilities being underutilized (BDDP, 2002). School dropout was rampant in the sub-county due to high poverty levels resulting from flood hazards. In primary schools the number of pupils who dropped out of school ranged from 10-15 per year. The number of girls who dropped out of school outnumbered that of boys. This observation confirmed UNICEF and ODA (1995) assertion that the dropout cases in the entire Busia County stood at 62.8% with 83% of all cases being girls.

The high dropout rate among girls was attributed to: (i) early marriages and (ii) unwanted pregnancies. With high poverty levels parents preferred educating boys than girls. Instead some parents married off their daughters in order to get income in form of dowry. Additionally, overcrowding in camps during floods exposed girls to early sexual practices. Coupled with minimal interaction with and supervision from parents, young girls were lured into social activities particularly the so-called disco-matanga (bereaved ceremonies). During such activities, girls engaged in "commercial" sex in order to meet some of the basic needs. This resulted in unwanted pregnancies forcing them to dropout out of school. For both primary and secondary the completion rates amongst girls was very low. In secondary schools for instance, sharp declines in girls' enrollment were observed from their third year of study (Form three) with just a handful registering for their secondary school final examination – Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). The consequence has been high illiteracy level among women in the sub-

Early and unexpected parenthood

Congestion in the flood camp, idleness and the need to obtain basic needs aggravated the rate of sexual immorality. The "come we stay" marriages, commercial sex and rape cases increased during flooding period. The aftermath was unwanted and unexpected parenthood particularly to the young girls. Most of the females who give birth in the sub-county were young girls aged between 13 and 25 years accounting for up to 77%. Records from Sisenye Dispensary indicated that of all the pregnancy cases reported in the dispensary about 40% were from girls aged between 13 and 19 years, while 37% were from those aged between 20 and 25. About 23% were from females who were over 25 years. High prevalence of pregnancy among girls aged between 13 and 19 years was caused by high illiteracy level and in turn limited knowledge about their reproductive health.

Floods and Health

A sick population is a poor society hence personal health is the key to both social and economic development. During the survey, about 70% of the sick persons found in homesteads were women. Among the elderly women, most of the illnesses were associated with psychological trauma. One of their core duties was to take care of the family members including the sick and those affected by floods. Daily encounter with sick relatives and occasional deaths accentuated the trauma making them vulnerable to many diseases (Nurse-in-charge Mukhobola Dispensary, Personal communication). Among the young females, frequent abortions and abortion related complications was one of the main causes of ill health. In attempt to avoid parental responsibility at tender ages, young females terminated their pregnancies through unsafe ways leading to health complications. The study revealed that among the in-patient diseases abortion related complications took the fifth position after malaria, respiratory diseases, skin diseases and diarrhoea. Most patients who suffered from abortion related complications were

between the age of 12 and 25 years. Unfortunately, the number of people who visited hospitals during floods was smaller as compared to the number during dry spells due to financial difficulties (BDDP, 2008).

Floods on Family Units

Most of the family units in the sub-county were headed by women. This was attributed to two main factors (i) in the struggled to salvage property from flooding waters, men were exposed men to flood-related diseases such as pneumonia, common cold, and bilharzias while some drowned leading to high male mortality rate. (ii) the high poverty levels associated with floods lowered men's ability to provide for their families forcing some men to abandon their families. Gradually, the role of men as the provider in the family was being taken up by women. The burden of bring up the children was largely left to women. Living in a highly food insecure environment, most women to depended on food handouts from the government and well-wishers. To cope with the food insecurity, some women ventured into small-scale businesses such as selling of vegetables or second hand clothes. A few, especially young women, ventured into men dominated businesses such as bicycle and motorcycle transport (bodaboda) and food kiosks.

In addition, floods sparked off family violence in the sub-county. Loss of property, low cooperation while salvaging flooded property, excessive consumption of cheap alcohols particularly by men and lack of food in the house raised emotion among family member triggering violence. As such family conflicts and separation and divorces were inevitable. For instance, the study established that about twenty families separated in Bulemia flood victims' camp due to domestic violence during the 2002 floods. Another cause of family separation was extra marital affairs. About 38% of the women interviewed indicated that their husbands engaged in extra marital affairs with other women in the flood camps, those taking refuge in their houses or even with women "prostitutes" living in the islands where men went fishing. Accusation and counteraccusations of unfaithfulness attracted violence against women. In some cases, men opted for divorces or marrying second wives.

Women Dignity

Destruction of the economic resource base by floods left women, who mostly took care of the families, without enough income to sustain their families. The economic hardship led some of them into "forced prostitution" to make ends meet. For instance, shortage of fish from Lake Victoria during flooding period led to demand sexual relationships among the male fishermen and female fish mongers in order for the fish mongers to get fish. The scramble for the available fish thus sparked "sex-for-fish" situation. More so, some of the employed men took the advantage of the humanitarian crisis caused by floods and lured women into sexual relationships. Willingly, some women engaged in prostitution as a way of getting extra income to feed their families. The study also revealed that some parents encouraged their daughters to engage in sexual immorality, especially with fishermen or employed men, in exchange for money to feed the family.

Challenges associated with floods were identified by about 62% of the respondents as the main cause of alcoholism amongst women. The rate of alcohol consumption increased during floods as women turned into the business of brewing local beer as a mean of generating income. The most popular brew amongst women and young girls was chang'aa and Mulingiro. The belief that "alcohol helped them forget their problems" lured many young and old women into the alcoholism. Easy accessibility and availability of chang'aa and Mulingiro (brewed in flood

camps), encouraged more women into it. Sometimes men demanded to be served by young girls for them to remain as loyal customers in the brewing dens. Young girls are forced to taste the liquor as an indicator that it was fit for consumption. Gradually, they got introduced into taking alcohol.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The occurrence of natural disasters brings not only economic underdevelopment in the affected areas but also human suffering. In developing countries women are the worst affected because of their massive role of fending for the family. In Bunyala sub-county, the role of fending for the family was largely carried out by women. Unfortunately, the perennial floods in the sub-county have greatly affected the socioeconomic well being of women rendering them highly vulnerable. Floods have largely contributed to low education levels among women, family violence, poor health, sexual harassment, early parenthood and economic hardships in general. Based on the role played by women in socioeconomic development and the high vulnerability to floods, the study recommends for active participation of women in flood disaster management. Women should be the main stakeholders in flood preparedness and mitigation projects. Their participation will be the key to successful disaster response and mitigation.

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