

A Case Study on Vijayawada Floods: Human story 2
"Left Out on the First Floor" A Human Story from Vambay Colony,
Vijayawada Floods (2024)

Background and Context: Living Between Concrete and Crisis

Vambay Colony in Vijayawada is a dense, low-income housing settlement built as part of government scheme to provide shelter for the urban poor. Consisting of tightly packed concrete structures, many residents have over time constructed an additional first floor above their ground-floor units, using their savings or SHG loans. These homes are not just shelters but also spaces for work and care. Families here belong largely to Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, with women playing key roles in sustaining their households through petty trade, tailoring, domestic work, and community caregiving. The 2024 floods in Vambay Colony were triggered by a breach in a nearby canal—resulting in a sudden, avoidable inundation. No flood alerts or warnings were issued, leaving residents caught completely off guard, particularly as it occurred on a Sunday morning when many Dalit Christian families from Packet A were at church for prayer services. Despite weak state engagement in service delivery, local social networks and SHGs have remained vibrant sources of information, solidarity, and support.

Key Points:

- ✚ Man-made disaster with no warning
- ✚ Widespread Loss of Identity Documents and Essentials
- ✚ Ground floor residents worst hit, but first floor excluded
- ✚ Women's livelihoods not counted
- ✚ Exclusion due to incomplete, top-down surveys
- ✚ No role for local institutions
- ✚ Gender blindness and lack of community engagement

Man-Made Flood: No Warning, No Time

What unfolded in Vambay Colony on that Sunday morning in early September 2024 was less a natural disaster and more a failure of systems meant to protect people. A sudden breach in Budameru canals that channels water through Vijayawada triggered the flooding—what many in the colony refer to as a "man-made flood." No official warning was given. There were no sirens, no alerts, no door-to-door advisories. And it happened on a Sunday—when most of the residents of Packet A, a predominantly Christian cluster in the colony, were at church for their weekly prayer services.

"We were just finishing the morning prayers when someone rushed in saying water was rushing into the lower blocks," recalled **Josephine Mary (name changed)**. "By the time we ran back, our rooms were already half-submerged. Important documents, ID cards, even the children's books—everything was gone."

The lack of early warning meant families had no time to secure their belongings or evacuate properly. For many, this meant losing identity documents crucial for accessing post-flood humanitarian support, including the cash transfers announced by the government. Women, in particular, bore the brunt—many of whom were alone at home or responsible for children and elders while the men were away at work or helping others escape.

"We didn't even get a warning. Suddenly, water started rushing in. I had to carry my daughter on my back and climb to the neighbour's first floor," said **Kameshwari (39)**, a single mother who works as a school cleaner. Within hours, ground floors were submerged, and families scrambled to move valuables, elderly family members, and children upstairs. Food, schoolbooks, appliances, and work materials were lost to the muddy sewage-laced waters. For many women, this included their livelihood tools—tailoring machines, cooking equipment, snack stocks, and grocery provisions bought in bulk.

Sharada (38), a widow with two daughters, recalled: "All the rice, dal, and utensils were stored near the kitchen floor. When I returned after the water receded, everything was spoiled. I didn't even have money for matches, let alone a meal."

On the first floors, power outages, overcrowding, and lack of drinking water made survival equally hard. Families hosting displaced neighbours struggled to meet basic needs, sharing cramped toilets and limited supplies.

Invisible Losses: The Gendered Gaps in Relief

Relief announcements promised Rs. 25,000 for fully damaged houses, Rs. 10,000 for partial damage, and Rs. 3,000 for livelihood losses. However, implementation was opaque and exclusionary. Officials visited once or twice with no community notice, often relying on visual inspection or lists from old records. First-floor residents were deemed unaffected regardless of their actual circumstances.

"The first time the officials came, they asked for Aadhaar and ration card – but everything was soaked and ruined in the water. I tried to explain, but they just moved on. Even when they came again, they wrote my husband's name wrong. Three rounds they did, and still, we didn't get anything. Almost one in four families here are like us – listed, but forgotten." — *Lakshamma (name changed), Vambay Colony resident*

Anitha (34), who runs a home-based tiffin business, explained: "All my supplies were downstairs—gas cylinder, grains, utensils. Nothing was usable. But they said, 'You're upstairs, you didn't suffer.' How can they decide that without even asking?"

Crucially, women's livelihood assets were not recognised as "productive" in compensation decisions. Items like sewing machines, tiffin carriers, and groceries were dismissed as household items, while motorbikes and toolkits used by men were listed as work tools eligible for support.

Sulochana (42), SHG treasurer and a tailor, lost her machine and materials stored on the ground floor. "I feed my family with that machine. My husband got help for his motorbike. I got nothing. They didn't even write my name down."

The system lacked grievance redress. Most residents did not know how to appeal. Others feared losing wages if they travelled to the MRO office. With no help desk in the colony and no community liaison, many simply gave up. **As Kameshwari put it:** "We may live on the margins, but our voices should be at the center."

A Missed Opportunity: Sidelineing Local Leadership and Community Networks

Despite its challenges, Vambay Colony has a strong tradition of community-led action. SHG networks maintain detailed records of members, savings, and family status. Churches and youth clubs regularly conduct outreach and run support groups. During the flood, these networks mobilized quickly—offering shelter, sharing rations, and helping each other with applications. But none were engaged formally in the relief process.

Immanuel Das (24), a local youth leader, said, "We knew which families needed help. We could have guided the officers, avoided duplication, helped file claims. But they didn't ask us."

Women SHG leaders offered to prepare accurate lists of affected households, especially of those with unregistered work losses. But their knowledge was not tapped. Even a simple community help desk in the Anganwadi center could have improved access.

Lalitha (40), who runs a snacks stall, said, "People trust us. If they had allowed us to collect names, at least our neighbours wouldn't be running around begging for help."

From Resilience to Resistance: Community Reflections and Solidarity

In the absence of adequate state support, it was the community that stepped in. Families hosted each other, SHGs pooled emergency funds, youth helped illiterate elders fill forms, and faith groups organized food distribution. Despite exhaustion and injustice, there is resilience—but also anger.

"They treat us like we're nothing. Our work, our homes, our dignity—all ignored. But we will not stay silent," said **Sulochana**, firm.

This experience has deepened conversations within the colony about rights, documentation, and how to demand accountability. Young women are joining local youth groups. SHG leaders are planning to draft a community disaster preparedness plan and share it with the municipal office.

Nagaraju (23), a volunteer, said: "Next time, we will be ready. We want to lead, not wait."

Recommendations for Gender-Responsive, Locally-Led Humanitarian Action:

The 2024 floods in Vambay Colony exposed not just infrastructural vulnerability but the deeper structural inequities of humanitarian response. By ignoring women's labour, excluding local knowledge, and privileging top-down implementation, the system failed those most affected. Yet within that failure lies the opportunity to reimagine recovery: rooted in community, accountable to the marginalized, and transformative for gender justice.

✦ **Recognize and Prepare for Man-Made Disasters:** Improve early warning systems, especially in urban flood-prone zones where breaches in canals or infrastructure failures may

lead to avoidable disasters. Invest in community-based disaster preparedness drills and communication channels.

✦ **Include first-floor and multi-family dwellings** in damage assessments, especially where livelihoods or access were disrupted.

✦ **Engage SHGs, youth leaders, and faith-based networks** in planning and outreach for relief, assessment, and grievance redress. **Support community-led data collection and disaster preparedness planning**, building local knowledge into formal humanitarian responses.

✦ **Publicly display beneficiary lists** in community centers or via mobile messages and allow community verification.

✦ **Create local help desks** or mobile grievance points to reduce travel burdens, especially for working women. **Provide Flexibility in Documentation Requirements:** During crises, damaged or missing ID documents should not lead to exclusion. Build mechanisms for self-attestation, community-based verification, and post-disbursement validation for emergency cash support.

✦ **Train officials and frontline workers** on gender-sensitive needs assessments and communication. **Recognize women's informal tools and household-based livelihoods** (sewing machines, cooking implements, food stock) as valid for compensation and recovery.

✦ **Build Long-Term Social Protection Linkages:** Use HCTs not just for emergency relief, but as entry points for enrolling excluded groups—especially women and minorities—into long-term social protection schemes like pensions, health insurance, and livelihood programs.
