

CROSSING THE GENDER DIVIDE IN DISASTER RELIEF



THE FOREIGN SERVICE AND RELIEF AGENCIES
NEED TO ADDRESS GENDER EQUITY IN DISASTER
ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

BY ROXANE RICHTER

After natural disasters strike, in many societies around the world it has traditionally been up to men to take action, leaving women to stoically endure the losses as hapless victims. It is true that this division of labor may reflect the reality that women are disproportionately affected by disasters and the ensuing collapse of public authority.

But it means that more than half of a community (i.e., women) remains uninvolved and voiceless in relief, reconstruc-

tion and development efforts.

Now consider the alternative: a vision of community aid that encompasses this tremendous untapped potential, with programs gender-savvy enough to plan, strategize and manage relief efforts *with* women rather than for them.

“Gender is a central organizing principle of every society. We need to make smart decisions to meet the needs of everyone, not just half of society,” observes Elaine Enarson, Ph.D., a noted author on gender in disasters and assistant professor of disaster and emergency studies at Brandon University in Manitoba, Canada. (Enarson’s personal catalyst for her research was surviving 1992’s Hurricane Andrew.) As she says, “Some policy-makers and practitioners today are willfully ignorant; they don’t want to challenge their way of thinking. Too often, raising the issue of gender is seen as divisive.”

In order to mobilize entire populations and NGOs, relief agencies and the Foreign Service community need to first address the role of gender equity in disaster and relief programs, looking specifically at differential power struggles, issues and needs (medical care, protection from sexual and domestic violence, etc.), rights (fair resource distribution), and vulnerabilities and strengths (caregivers, peacemakers and community mobilizers) in these arenas.

Fortunately, this is not a new concept. In April 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell sent the following guidance to all State Department officials: “Women’s issues are human rights issues, health and education issues, and development issues. They are ingredients of good government and sound economic practice. ... Women must play prominent roles in relief, reconstruction and development efforts if these undertakings are to succeed.”

“We’ve recognized the need and positive contributions

A certified National Registry Emergency Medical Technician, Roxane Richter worked with numerous female Hurricane Katrina evacuees who fled to her native city of Houston in 2005. Those experiences provided the catalyst for her research on gender issues in disasters and development. She has served in several disaster relief programs and humanitarian aid organizations, traveling to over 50 countries. For 15 years she worked as a professional writer and is currently vice president of World Missions Possible (www.worldmissionspossible.org), a nonprofit organization that assists the underprivileged with medical services, humanitarian aid and disaster reconstruction efforts.

that women can bring to disaster planning and recovery,” says Katherine Blakeslee, director of USAID’s Women in Development office. “The U.S. is the largest supporter of humanitarian aid and development and where disasters go, we go. And in our own preparedness, we are trying to incorporate concern for the differential impacts that disasters and conflicts have on women and men.”

The WID office “promotes a stronger and more productive role for women in development” through gender integration, outreach and gender-equity training, addressing issues such as trafficking, legal rights, violence and education.

A Human Rights Issue

The 20th century witnessed many international accords and declarations testifying to women’s equality under human rights laws. In 1945, the newly established United Nations set the goal of eliminating gender-based discrimination, and in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights abolished any “laws, customs, regulations and practices that are discriminatory to women” (Article 2). In 1979, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women, which 180 of the world’s 192 countries have ratified (the U.S. is the only industrialized country that has not ratified it).

CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination, which includes “... any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

Global conferences like 1995’s “Beijing Plus 10” have attempted to empower and improve the lives of women by establishing a guide for national governments to set public policy. That conference’s Platform for Action provided benchmarks through which citizens could measure their government’s implementation of the Beijing commitments.

Regrettably, those fine words have not been fully matched with action. According to the World Bank, one of the reasons it’s been so difficult for NGOs and government agencies to do so is the dearth of gender-disaggregated data. Incredibly, there is no gender-specific data on mortalities in 90 percent of developing nations or on unemployment in 75 percent of the global population. Half of

the world lives in places where economic activity by gender has not been reported for at least the last decade. “The fact that we still have not fully mainstreamed gender issues amounts to the exclusion of women. We need to make women more visible in statistics,” says Maya Buvinic, director of gender and development for the World Bank’s Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network.

Yet despite legal and social instruments to protect women against inequitable aid distribution and human rights abuses, and the existence of numerous governmental and private agencies capable of enforcing those measures, there continues to be an inordinate amount of gender-based violence and suffering among women in disaster settings.

In September 2000, Human Rights Watch charged that widespread sexual and domestic abuse had left countless female refugees from Rwanda and Burundi physically battered, traumatized and fearful for their lives in Tanzanian refugee camps. “When Burundi[an] women fled the internal conflict there, they expected to find safety and protection in the camps. Instead, they simply escaped one type of violence in Burundi to face other forms of abuse,” wrote Chirumbidzo Mabuwa, author of the report and researcher for the women’s rights division of HRW. For instance, Tanzanian police officers did not regard domestic violence as a crime. So, rather than investigate reports of domestic violence, police simply referred the victims to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations for counseling.

Women in such situations are also frequently attacked and raped by police, military personnel, border guards and traveling bandits because most of the programs and services offered to victims and refugees are developed, implemented and administered by men, and sexual favors in exchange for food, relief assistance and documentation are all-too-common occurrences.

In Disasters, Gender Matters

When we speak of disasters, we need to realize that there are a wide variety of types, each with differing implications for women. In broad-based terms, according to the U.N. Development Program, these include:

While women are severely affected by natural and manmade disasters, they also gain unique opportunities to change their gendered status in society.

- Rapid-onset disasters (e.g., earthquakes, storms) that destroy homes but usually do not lead to displacement;
- Slow-onset disasters (e.g., drought, desertification) that can have a severe social and economic impact, but also offer more time to formulate and implement relocation and coping strategies;
- Human-induced disasters (e.g., armed conflicts) that not only cause displacement and loss of possessions, but can trigger more profound psychological trauma than do natural disasters;

- Epidemics (e.g., HIV/AIDS), in which women bear disproportionate caretaker burdens;
- Floods that cause displacement for short time periods; and
- Refugee emergencies (e.g., mass persecution, armed conflict) that cause displacement and extreme social and familial disruption. They also increase work demands, sexual violence and psychosocial trauma for women.

Globally, approximately two billion people were affected by natural disasters between 1990 and 1999 alone, stated the World Health Organization in a 2002 report. Those calamities caused over 600,000 fatalities, accounting for nearly a third of that total. The study also found that there is a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process — in preparedness, response, physical and psychological impact, risk perception, risk exposure and recovery and reconstruction.

Enarson says that the trend is toward increasing vulnerability to such disasters. “We need to engage local people to develop local capacities and stop thinking only outside experts can repair disasters. . . . We need to stop focusing on relief [and instead] back up and review the root causes of the disasters.” She points out that the impact of disasters is steadily increasing due to erratic weather, growing populations in coastal regions and ongoing issues for women such as poverty, illiteracy and a lack of social safety nets.

As a result of their lower status in society, women are disproportionately affected by natural disasters, and are made even more vulnerable to disasters through their socially constructed roles. The International Labor

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Organization has declared, “Gender shapes the social worlds in which natural events occur.” For instance, many Bangladeshi women died in their homes with their children in a 1991 cyclone because they needed to wait for their husbands to make an evacuation decision. Higher female death rates in an earthquake in Maharashtra, India, were due to women being inside the home while men were in open areas. One report from Bangladesh, according to the World Health Organization, describes a father who could not rescue both of his children — and chose to release his daughter, rather than his son, saying, “[He] has to carry on the family line.”

This is certainly not to say that men are unaffected by disasters. “Both men and women are handicapped by socialization. When men fail to fulfill their ‘perceived’ responsibility by protecting their family, they react in many ways, like an increase in alcoholism and domestic violence,” explains Betty Morrow, Ph.D., a professor emeritus at Florida International University’s International Hurricane Center in Miami, Fla. “If there is a definitive gender difference in disasters, women are more likely to evac-

uate and weigh risk more carefully than men. I can’t tell you how many men I’ve interviewed in FEMA trailers and shelters who said, ‘I wish I’d listened to her.’”

Risk Factors

Many factors contribute to gender differences in the degree of exposure and social vulnerability to disasters:

Less access to help. Essential information and resources in disaster preparedness, mitigation and rehabilitation are less available to women. These include transportation, social networks and influences, and decision-making skills. (Of the billion or so illiterate people around the world, two-thirds are female.)

Gender division of labor. Worldwide, women hold (predominantly) underpaid jobs in agriculture (and own just 1 percent of the world’s land). They are more often self-employed and tend to operate within the informal economy. Because the agricultural and informal economy sectors are the most affected by natural disasters, women are over-represented among the unemployed after a natural disaster.

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Less ability to migrate for employment. Due to home, child and/or elderly care issues, women are less mobile generally. But inadequate post-disaster shelter (for cooking, bathing, etc.) leaves women with even less freedom and mobility to look for work.

Loss of “bargaining position” in households. When a woman’s household possessions and other economic resources are taken away in a disaster, her social position and authority also decline.

Heightened perception of disaster risk. Because girls and women generally perceive disaster threats as more serious than do men, they suffer more distress and emotional disorders in their aftermath, according to studies by the World Health Organization. However, it should be noted that overall declines in emotional well-being may be due to expanded post-disaster caregiving roles.

Significant increases in domestic and sexual violence. In the wake of a loss of social authority following a natural calamity (such as a police force), women are left unprotected from crimes like rape, violence, theft and other forms of exploitation.

Greater risk of being/becoming sole economic providers. Following a disaster, a woman is more likely to be left responsible for family members and children.

Higher dependence on social services. In their roles as family caretakers, women rely heavily on schools, clinics, child-care centers and public services, as well as water, fuel (wood), crops and other natural resources. These assets tend to be disrupted by natural disasters.

Social isolation. In general, women have less free time, personal autonomy and less knowledge of how to access emergency assistance or capacity to do so.

Low representation in emergency management organizations and professions. This disparity leaves women less visible in the mainstream “malestream” of high-level emergency management decision-making roles.

Health issues. Due to inadequate (or nonexistent) OB/GYN health care and reproductive control, after a disaster women suffer more infections, premature births, malnutrition, unwanted pregnancies and pregnancy losses.

Yet this lengthy list of risk factors may well give only half of the picture. While women are severely affected by nat-

ural and manmade disasters, they also gain unique opportunities to change their gendered status in society. For instance, after Hurricane Mitch struck Guatemala and Honduras in October of 1998, women proved themselves indispensable by building houses and shelters and digging wells. Though it is often against men's wishes, women can take on "male" tasks in such crises, which can permanently change that society's conceptions of women's capabilities. There have also been effective media campaigns to help change men's attitudes towards violence against women.

The Other Side of the Coin

There are also many changes that can take place in gender relations following a crisis or disaster, including a change in demographics as fewer men survive than women (Rwanda currently reports a 7-3 female to male ratio); a change in expectations for marriage and children; changes in labor division and increased political mobilization as women experience the benefits of working with other women.

Children and women account for 75 to 80 percent of the world's refugees. Still, it should be understood that their vulnerability is primarily cultural and organizational, not biological or physiological. Paradoxically, relief agencies have tended to treat women as ill-fated victims — incapacitated by vulnerability — rather than concentrating on building upon women's strengths and opportunities in post-disaster scenarios. According to Refugees International, women play "a vital role in the alleviation of poverty, prevention of conflict and in sustaining peace, and are also the majority of the displaced in conflict settings. Yet women, particularly displaced women, are largely excluded from decisions that ensure their very survival."

In the 1980s, it was not uncommon to have all aid go only to every able-bodied male head of household. Due to U.N. mandates like the 1991 Guidelines on the Protection for Refugee Women, this global scenario has changed — and women are now included or even singled out as the sole household recipients of distributed goods.

Back in 1995, an assessment by the World Food Program showed that "gender-neutral" language in aid distribution was taken by the organization as a mark of success in reaching women. Unfortunately, like many other studies, the WFP findings overlooked the complexities of culture, gender and crisis, consigning women to the catchall relief classification of "women and children" — a term that some gender researchers argue carries the con-

notation that it is through their maternal relationship to children that women are rightfully "deserving" of help. Still, the WFP does attempt to distribute some 80 percent of relief directly into the hands of women and 50 percent of its educational resources to girls.

When men are the only registered aid recipients, according to the University of Sussex's Institute of Development, drawbacks can include: food being sold on the market or used to supply armed forces; adverse nutritional effects on children whose mother's status as a polygamous wife is low (as in Tajikistan and Gaza); men using food aid as a tool to reinforce their control over female kin; and women losing their influence over food management (a singular area of female control). For example, in written correspondence after the massive 2004 tsunami, a South Asian judge told relief workers, "As usual, the women and the children have suffered most. Even the little relief aid that is sent is grabbed by the stronger men."

Yet there is growing evidence that women are more effective recipients of aid than men. According to a November 2005 *Newsweek* article, "Around the world, if you give cash to a mother, she tends to use it to invest in her children's health and education. A man, on the other hand, will often take it and head to the local watering hole." Studies from Brazil show that the survival possibilities of a child increase by 20 percent if the income is in the hands of the mother rather than the father.

Gender-Based Policies that Work

According to *InterAction*, a publication of the American Council for Voluntary International Action, a basic "to do" checklist for integrating gender into relief efforts would include the following elements:

- Incorporate input from displaced females into assistance efforts;
- Use gender-sensitive rapid assessment checklists from the onset of crises;
- Design relief efforts to strengthen sustainable development;
- Announce all distributions of food, supplies and services as widely as possible; and
- Train field staff in gender analysis, gender and culture assessments.

There have been many examples of successful women-led initiatives. For instance, according to Marion Pratt, social science adviser to USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, displaced women in southern Sudan are

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taking on active and successful peacebuilding roles not only in the refugee camps, but once they return home. “They’ve been marginalized in the past, but now they have the chance to change their future,” says Pratt.

Similar scenarios are taking place elsewhere. The Rwanda Women’s Network caters to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence “in the recognition that women and children bore the brunt of the genocide, and remain the most vulnerable and marginalized groups within Rwandan civil society.” These women are also creating informal social organizations. While these networks may go largely unrecognized by government entities and global NGOs, they are durable replacements for all-but-vanished formal networks and infrastructure.

So in the end, there is no longer any question that women have gender-distinctive physical, psychological, social and economic needs, vulnerabilities and capabilities in disaster situations. No longer can women — who make up the “silent majority” of the world’s poor, aid recipients and displaced persons — be consigned to the “women and children” catchall classification.

There is a tremendous global need to fight against the marginalization of women in disaster and aid programs. It may only be through the worldwide promotion of women’s rights — based on universal human rights and government-sponsored and enforced laws — that true equity in development and assistance might be realized.

Perhaps the ancient Bahá’í writings speak most eloquently to the importance and promise of equitable roles for women in disaster aid programs: “Humanity is possessed of two wings: male and female. So long as these two wings are not equal in strength, the bird will not fly.”

The struggle for human rights and equity in disasters must be about making women’s lives count the same as men’s — allowing justice and equality to take wing for all.

For more information on gender issues in disasters, view *The Gender and Disaster Sourcebook*, an electronic compilation of international resources on policy, practice and research designed to help address gender concerns in disaster risk reduction. The *Sourcebook* is available through the Gender and Disaster Network Web site: <http://www.gdnonline.org/sourcebook/>. ■