

# Community Life and Disaster Reduction

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Most of us are familiar with the media images of mothers with their children, standing amidst the wreckage of floods, cyclones, earthquakes and other major disasters. These pictures reinforce a common stereotype about women and disasters: that women are, first and foremost, victims. They are vulnerable. They are poor, marginalized or lack political influence.

But this is only half the picture. Women have an important and positive role in communities. They are most likely to be the ones to feed and care for family and community members. They contribute financially (whether through formal or informal sectors). They are also an important force in community voluntary groups.

Given their central role in family and community life, how can women be empowered to protect communities from disasters?

Disasters work like a magnifying glass for society. They magnify what is good and what needs help. The problems before a disaster are the problems after a disaster, just worse. When a disaster happens, both the strong and the weak points in society really stand out. This is true for the state of gender issues as much as any other issue.

As part of a recent global communications campaign dealing with women, children and disasters, the Secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) worked with United Nations agencies and national institutions around the world examining issues related to women and disasters. The focus was on empowering both women and children to take a stronger role in protecting their own communities from disasters. As part of the process, countries were encouraged to organize national roundtables for World Disaster Reduction Day (which takes place the second Wednesday of

*Women play a central role in protecting communities from disasters. Too often though they stay behind the scenes. The International Decade for Natural Disasters Reduction promotes their visibility. Recognizing a reality.*

October of each year). We also carried out a literature review on women and disasters, concentrating on prevention, mitigation, preparedness and reconstruction, rather than on relief operations.

## Beyond ambiguity

In a word, what we found was ambiguity. The role of women in protecting communities from disasters is ambiguous – because the position of women in society is ambiguous. For example, at one major conference I attended, the head of the national office for earthquake protection (a man) suggested to some very influential women, from leading families, who were lawyers and government ministers, university professors, and so forth – that the best thing women could do, since they run the household, is make sure the draperies are properly fastened, so they don't fall and injure someone if the earth starts shaking. The rapporteur at this same conference (a woman) was at the other end of the spectrum on women's issues. She used every opportunity to insist on the empowerment of women, without dealing with any disaster-specific issues.

Before looking at solutions, we have to accept that discussions about the role of women in disaster management can be polarized and exclusionary, just like discussions about the role of women in other aspects of life. Some believe that women have no special needs in disasters, while others use the issue to champion the empowerment of women. What we need are fact-based decisions about how to integrate women in a

process that protects communities from disasters.

## Challenges on the path of women's greater involvement

Encourage women to have greater visibility in official channels related to disaster management, which are largely male-staffed. Following floods in Australia in 1992, a female relief worker said: "The most public aspects of the clean-up were a male affair. The State Emergency Service, police, fire brigade, salvation and military armies were constituted almost entirely of men, and the work they did was very public and recognised as such. On the other hand, women . . . predominantly worked in the privacy of their homes and their role in the clean-up was less visible."

As for official community development work that reduces disaster risks, there aren't enough women involved there either. Our regional officer in Latin America reports that women do not participate enough in official preparedness and mitigation work. Who decides where wells will be dug or dams will be built? Will communities protect things that are obvious to mothers, like a bridge that always floods on a route that children take going home from school? We have to give women a real say in community organization if we want them to be effective.

Address cultural issues which cause women to stay behind the scenes in disasters (as in everyday life), making it more difficult to acknowledge their concerns or contributions. This tradition can

do more than keep valuable female perspectives from being incorporated in planning. When taken to an extreme, it can even put women in danger. One woman from a development NGO in Bangladesh noted that "A woman is under great pressure because of the practice of purdah, a traditional custom not to leave the house when the husband is away. Without her husband to escort her, she cannot go alone to the cyclone shelter. . . And many husbands work away from home. . . After a cyclone, women have often been left alone in their damaged homes, unreached by aid workers, unable to contribute to community rehabilitation decisions. . ."

Women do have specific issues that make them more vulnerable. This needs to be more widely understood or accepted. Until recently, researchers felt that natural disasters didn't discriminate among their victims. But recent research shows that at least for famines and earthquakes, there is a convincing case that

mortality rates are higher for women than for men.

A recent Canadian study on post-disaster stress shows that women and children are the first to be marginalized or abused. Stressful situations are harder for women because they lack control over resources and have more family responsibilities.

#### **Solutions do exist.**

##### **Some examples:**

Build on where women are strong in communities, such as channels related to primary health care and community literacy programmes. In the Caribbean, literacy programmes for women have been used as a channel for disaster prevention messages. In Bangladesh, one agency trained village women about simple ways to protect children from disease after disasters. These women went door-to-door with their message to thousands of households.

Encourage more research. Gender

research on disaster issues is scarce. Good research can point the way to practical solutions. For example, after a 1992 earthquake in Turkey, a researcher from a local university assembled a predominantly female research team to survey psychosocial attitudes after the disaster. The teams surveyed women at home, and found out that they were eager to discuss their experiences, but hadn't done so previously because other research teams were mostly male and the women couldn't invite the strange men into their home. The female researchers were welcomed, and they learned that women find it difficult to participate in local preparedness committees because the meetings are scheduled in a way that don't take into account domestic responsibilities, and no child care arrangements are available.

Make it official. In roundtables held for World Disaster Reduction Day in 1995 the one common recommendation from countries everywhere was to better link community NGOs and government officials responsible for disaster-related issues. Officially designating women's groups as focal points with local or national authorities is a good start. It is easier to systematically receive information and be invited in decision-making processes that way. This process was started in several countries, as a result of those roundtables.

Work together. It is useful to specifically incorporate gender balance in neighbourhood committees that deal with what they called "emergency and development" issues. In Chosica, Peru, after experiencing many landslides, this is what they did. Men and women worked together to produce risk maps, build retaining walls and design water systems for tree plantations that would reduce the impact of landslides.

Recognize the reality. Addressing the specific needs and special contributions women can make is a process that will take time. Progress in this area will move as quickly, or as slowly, as other gender-related issues facing our society. ■

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