

Hurricane Mitch: Women's Needs and Contributions

Women in Development Program Unit

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Foreword

This report examines evidence from post-Mitch Central America and disasters in other parts of the world to identify the ways disasters affect women and to highlight women's participation in prevention, relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts. It attempts to fill a void in the knowledge regarding people's responses to disasters in the region, by exploring the gender dimension and providing general guidelines for integrating a gender perspective in effective disaster management.

The report was prepared for and presented at the meeting of the Consultative Group for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America which took place in Stockholm, Sweden, May 25-27, 1999. It is based on a technical meeting attended by international and government agencies and NGOs which was held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, May 6-7, 1999 ("Hurricane Mitch: Effects on Women and their Participation in the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America"), as well as background papers prepared by Enrique Gómáriz (consultant), Shubh Kumar-Range (consultant), and Jane Mocellin (World Health Organization).⁴ I would like to acknowledge the team of Country Division 3 in Region II and the Bank's Representation in Honduras for their collaboration in, respectively, organizing and hosting the technical meeting, and the governments of Norway, Denmark and Sweden for their generous support in the preparation of this report.

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- Technical Meeting on Gender and Natural Disasters, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, May 6-7, 1999

Introduction

Hurricane Mitch hit Central America in October 1998. In the first moments after the shock, emergency relief systems reported more male deaths indicating that the immediate impacts of Mitch were more severe for men than for women. However, as this report shows, over the long-term, surviving women and their children may suffer greater negative consequences than men, unless supportive measures are implemented.

Because of both biological and gender differences, men and women were affected differently by Mitch and made different contributions to relief efforts. Sex and gender-specific vulnerabilities determined differential impacts of the tragedy on men and women. For instance, slightly more men died, while more women reported suffering physical and mental health-related problems. Similarly, gender-specific capabilities shaped men's and women's different responses and contributions to relief and mitigation efforts. For instance, more women prepared food in shelters while more men transported victims to shelters.

The institutional responses to the tragedy in the first emergency relief stage, however, appeared to have overlooked women's specific vulnerabilities and needs and underplayed their potential contribution to relief and reconstruction. As the countries moved from relief to rehabilitation and reconstruction, gender issues emerged more clearly and some recon-

struction plans included these concerns. However, these efforts may have been too little, too late. Over time, the underemphasis on women's capabilities and vulnerabilities can have costly consequences for reconstruction and undermine transformation efforts.

This report is based on background papers prepared on the effects of Mitch and past disasters on women, and inputs from a technical meeting with government and NGO representatives of the four countries directly affected by Mitch —El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua— and Costa Rica, which suffered indirect impacts. The report first briefly summarizes social indicators that point to the nature of women's vulnerability to disasters. It then describes the differential effects of Mitch on women's vulnerabilities and capabilities in relief and rehabilitation. Using evidence on gender and disasters elsewhere in the world, it also attempts to foresee differential impacts in reconstruction. Based on this evidence, the report then draws lessons and general guidelines to integrate women's vulnerabilities and capabilities in relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, thus making these efforts more effective.

While the report acknowledges that the effects of Mitch varied significantly across countries, it stresses regional trends, needs and responses rather than country-specific ones. Throughout, the report assumes that the active participation of women in reconstruction is necessary for the transformation of the region.

Female Vulnerability to Disasters

Disasters feed on and magnify people's vulnerabilities. Selected social indicators reveal critical vulnerabilities for women in the affected countries, which explain the differential gender effects of Mitch. Table 1 summarizes these indicators. Prior to Mitch, the affected countries reported some of the lowest life expectancy and among the highest maternal mortality, fertility, teenage pregnancy and illiteracy rates for women in the region, especially in rural areas, revealing their low health and educational status and high reproductive health burdens. In addition, comparatively high rates of female headship in the four countries suggest heavy economic burdens for

women. In Honduras and El Salvador, recent data indicate both the high prevalence of female headship and its relationship to poverty. In 1992, female-headed households accounted for 29% of all urban households in Honduras, but a high 35% of the poorest (indigent) households (ECLAC, 1995). In 1995, these figures were 31% and 35%, respectively, for urban El Salvador where, after controlling for other determinants of poverty, female headship increased by 11.5% the probability that a family would be poor (Gammage, 1998).

The combination of women's low health and educational status, poverty and heavy

Table 1: Indicators of Women's Status

	Nicaragua	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Average LAC
Maternal mortality (1990)* ¹	160	220	200	300	191
Fertility rates (1995) ²	4.1	4.6	5.1	3.3	2.8
Births to adolescent women (% 15-19 years) (1990-95) ³	23.9	18.5	17.0	23.5	15.7
Women's Life Expectancy (1995) ⁴	67.9	71.2	68.7	72.1	72.3
Female headship (%) (1990) ⁵	24.3	20.4	16.9	26.6	20.0
Rate of female illiteracy (%) (1995 est.) ⁶	33.4	27.3	42.7	30.2	N/A
Rate of rural female illiteracy (%) (1995) ⁷	41.2	25.2	53.4	40.0	N/A
Women in Parliament (% as of July 99) ⁸	9.7	9.4	12.5	16.7	15.4
Women at ministerial level (%) (1995) ⁹	11	11	19	6	7

*rates are per 100,000 live births.

Sources: 1,2,4, 9: UNDP Human Development Report, 1998. 3: CELADE. impacto de las Tendencias Demográficas sobre los Sectores Sociales en AL. 1996. 5: The World's Women: 1995 Trends and Statistics. 6: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1998. (Guatemala data is 1994). 7: Population census in Nicaragua (1995) and Guatemala (1996), household surveys in Honduras and El Salvador. 8: Inter-Parliamentary Union. July, 1999.

spending a larger share of their meager resources on **their** children. However, below a certain level of minimum income, female headship tends to replicate poverty rather than protect from it, triggering an intergenerational transmission of poverty between mothers and their children (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997). Female heads of household (with or without partners), who have children and need to both work at home and in the subsistence or market economy, are perhaps the extreme example of the vulnerability of most women with children among the poor. In addition, because women are the principal promoters of child health and well being, especially among the poor, the exposure of children to disasters such as Mitch depends on and can be gauged by the vulnerability of women.

In part, the high rates of female headship are tied to the history of civil and armed

conflict in the region and resulting high **rates** of male mortality and outmigration. Another likely legacy of these **Wars** is the high rates **of** domestic violence that increases the vulnerability of women and children. Data for **Leon**, Nicaragua (1995) and Sacatepequez, Guatemala (1990), show that 40% of all women with partners in the former and 49% in the latter have been subjected to physical abuse (Buvinić, Morrison and Shifter, 1999). These are very high rates, even for a region known for high incidences of domestic and social violence.

The last *two* rows in Table 1 show women's participation in political decision-making. They indicate that, like elsewhere in Latin America, women have little voice in public policy-making. This lack of participation implies that unless explicit actions are taken relief and reconstruction efforts will repeat rather than reduce women's vulnerability.

The Impact of Hurricane Mitch

It is well accepted that disasters result from a combination of risks and vulnerabilities, both human and ecological. Disasters hit poor people and depleted environments hardest. Strong communities and a well-balanced ecology resist shocks better. This perspective guides the findings presented below, which are divided into the gender differential impacts of and responses to Mitch, emphasizing the situation of women.

The Human Toll

As Table 2 shows Mitch hit Honduras the hardest and it is there where the human loss was the greatest. Unfortunately, mortality

figures disaggregated by sex are not available for Honduras and Guatemala, but data for Nicaragua and El Salvador show that more men than women died, while the sex distribution of people in shelters seems to have mirrored their distribution in the population. This disparity in deaths by sex seems to have been the result of the high risks involved in rescue activities ~~that~~ men undertook combined with their tendency to underestimate situational risks. On the other hand, in some cases, women's lack of autonomy and capacity to make decisions jeopardized evacuation efforts and possibly increased the loss of lives of women and children (Gomáriz, 1999).

	Honduras	Nicaragua		Guatemala	El Salvador		Total
			%			%	
<i>Deaths</i>	5657	3045		268	240		9210
Women			46			43	
Men			54			57	
<i>In shelters</i>	285,000	65,271		54,725	55,864		460,860
Women			50			49	
Men			50			51	
<i>Affected population</i>	1,500,000	867,752		730,000	346,910		3,444,662
Women			49				
Men			51				
<i>Percentage Affected</i>	24	20		6	6		10

Source: ECLAC. 1999. *Los efectos regionales del Mitch*; Secretaría Nacional de Familia de El Salvador.

The Impact on Families Headed by Women

As a group, female-headed households are economically and politically disadvantaged. Unless official relief programs take specific measures to support this group, crises only magnify their burden. For instance, the majority of families who lost their homes as a result of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake were headed by single women with small children, worked in informal sector jobs, such as street food vending and were near or below the poverty level (Dufka, 1988). Similarly, in South Florida, low-income women such as public housing residents, migrant workers and battered women were particularly hard hit by hurricane Andrew and slow to recover. Two years after the hurricane, those still struggling to get housing were the poorest of the poor, mostly minority women (Enarson and Morrow, 1997).

Indications are that, unless specific measures are implemented, female-headed households may also be among the last to recover in the wake of Mitch. Data on

shelter composition in the four countries show that, over time, as the shelter population shrinks, the proportion of women increases slightly and the proportion of female-headed families increases significantly, becoming the last to leave. During the first weeks after Mitch, the proportion of families headed by women living in shelters in Tegucigalpa was already 41%. As the shelter population diminished, this proportion continued to grow, rising to 57.6%. By the end of last year, the number of Nicaraguans living in shelters had dropped from 65,000 to 17,000 people. Yet, the proportion of women had risen slightly, from 48.8% to 49.8%, and the proportion of families headed by women had grown substantially (Gomáriz, 1999).

In the case of Honduras, Gomáriz (1999) states that part of the increase in female headship may be due to the perception that these families may receive priority assistance, since many of the women heads of household that are registered in the shelters have a stable male partner. It may also be the case, however, that women are the main breadwinner in these families (that

is, they are the "economic" head of the family). The proportion of families in which women are in this position is significant in the region. A recent analysis shows that in El Salvador the percentage of female-headed households rises from 31% to 37% when the economic headship of women is taken into consideration (Gammage, 1998).

Female Employment Losses

Information about losses in employment and income is scattered and anecdotal. However, a common pattern that emerges in all four countries is substantial employment losses for both sexes in different occupations. Female employment losses are predominant in industry and agro-industry. Expectations are for a slower recovery of female employment compared to male employment. The reason for this is that typical reconstruction (including construction), absorb mostly male labor.

In Honduras, employment losses in agricultural exports may have affected 8,000 women in banana and melon packaging plants and shrimp farms, who make up 23% of the women employed in the sector. Another 12,000 women may have lost their jobs in industry and services. These 20,000 lost jobs represent approximately 3.4% of the total economically active female population of Honduras (Gomáriz, 1999). In most of the export fruit production sector, men have continued to work rebuilding plantations, while women's jobs in washing and packing have ceased. In manufacturing, reports mention layoffs of female workers only. This may be the result of the inaccurate notion that female incomes are secondary to men's role as breadwinners.

A conservative estimate for Honduras by Enrique Gomáriz (1999) is that during 1999 women's open unemployment rates will double (to above 9%), while underemploy-

ment will go up to 60% from 47% in 1998.¹ He warns, however, that only some of the losses in female employment will be registered as open unemployment while other losses will be shown as underemployment or will become invisible as women report household activities and are added to the inactive population in labor force surveys.

Informal employment suffered severely and women were particularly affected. Reports include losses in goods and infrastructure because of the destruction caused by the natural disaster as well as robberies and raids. A critical problem is the ability of informal entrepreneurs to reschedule, refinance and repay existing micro-loans and to secure new ones.

Food-for-work schemes were part of the post-disaster income opportunities. In Nicaragua, a survey shows that 40% of all participants in these programs were women. This is corroborated by information from the World Food Program, which indicates that 43% of recipients were women. Other cases point to the fact that men were favored by cash schemes while volunteer work was assigned to women. For instance, in Guatemala it seems that most of the 7,000 daily wages paid under the "100 Days Agenda" initiative went to men. This is worrisome since women's incomes are important to the nutritional and health status of their children. This is especially true in Central America, where women are the primary income earners in more than one third of households.

Health and Violence

The available information suggests that Mitch mimicked worldwide gender dif-

¹ Estimations made for this report on the basis of available information