

Role of Women in Disaster Management

by Audrey Mullings (LRCS) & Gloria Noël (PAHO)

Pan-Caribbean Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Project (PCDPPP) Staff Members

Introduction

The annual global loss resulting from natural disasters gives cause for concern. A single hazardous event can cause injuries, deaths, destroy crops and buildings, thus totally disrupting community life. Two-thirds of the world's population live in developing countries and 95 per cent of disaster-related deaths occur in these countries. During the period 1970-1981, more than one million people died in natural disasters and the economic loss is estimated to be over US \$46 billion*.

Disasters do not only affect development; there is also a significant relationship between development strategies and the extent to which a country is prepared to respond in the event of a disaster. Through sustained efforts, including those of Hazards and Vulnerability Analyses, Prevention and Mitigation, Preparedness Planning, Education and Training, it is possible to avert some disasters, and in

others to minimize the number of injuries and deaths, and also reduce the resulting socio-economic burden and loss.

In most societies, women constitute more than fifty per cent of the population and are a major human resource in socio-economic develop-

ment. However, this resource can only be realized if women are involved and active in the development process.

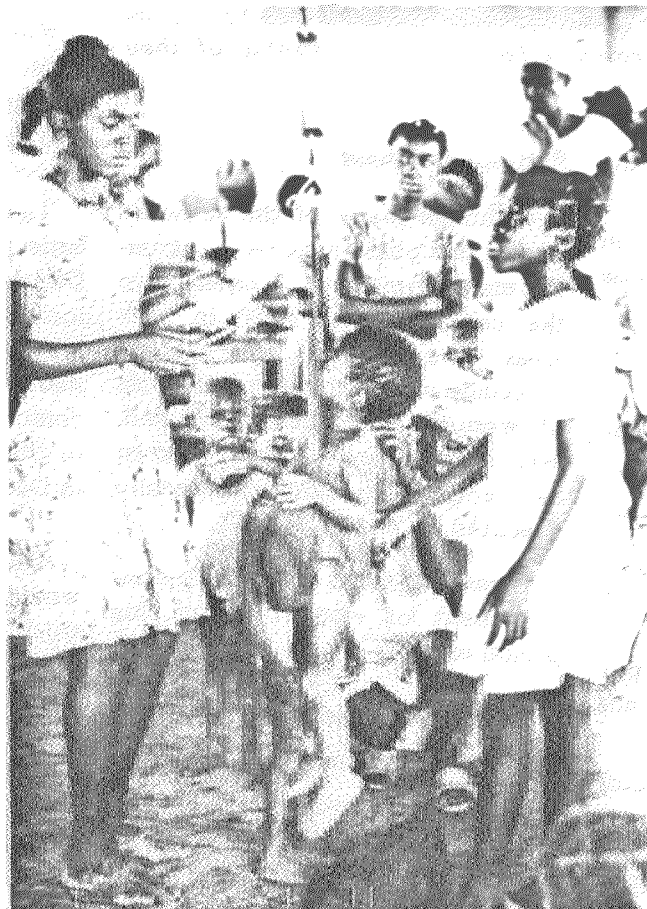
The theme of this paper is centered around the need for guidelines relating to the involvement of women in Disaster Management within the context of the development process in each country, and suggests some of the ways in which women can contribute in the following three phases, namely:

■ Preparedness Phase

In the development world two-thirds of all households are headed by women, which has significant implications for the influence of women and their contribution to the socialization process of individuals, family units and the community.

Essentially, the role of women in the Preparedness Phase ranges from teaching simple everyday safety measures in the home, to hazard identification in the community.

In this phase, suggested areas in which women can contribute include:



Women can play an important role in primary health care. Nutritional survey in Haiti.

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Lebanon: women retrieving personal effects from the rubble of their home.

- Practice of safety measures in the home;
- Education of the community in skills for use in the response phase e.g. First Aid;
- Identification of community resources;
- Preparation and implementation of family disaster plans;
- Participation in community disaster planning;
- Participation in the testing of community disaster plans;
- Participation through womens' groups in public awareness and information programmes;
- Evacuation of vulnerable individuals and community groups e.g. the elderly, persons with physical and mental disability;
- Learning construction skills to assist with the provision and maintenance of safe housing.

■ Response Phase

Although many of the activities during this phase have been primarily male dominated, women have the capabilities to assist in such areas as e.g. Search and Rescue, especially when considering the role of women in World War II and, even more recently, where women have engaged in tasks traditionally executed by men.

Some suggested areas for the involvement of women during this period include:

- Search and Rescue;
- Shelter management;
- Maintaining environmental health e.g. safe water, vector control, solid and sewage disposal, food safety, etc.;
- Identification of needs and available resources;

- Emergency feeding, clothing, etc.;
- Provision of First Aid and appropriate referrals to other levels of health care;
- Care of vulnerable groups e.g. elderly and handicapped;
- Providing emotional support for community members;
- Addressing needs of relief workers such as rest, food, etc.

■ Recovery Phase

During this phase the contribution of women is often overlooked. Some suggested areas for the involvement of women include:

- Support for the restoration of Primary Health Care Services within the community with specific reference to the management of common health problems;
- Re-afforestation and replanting of crops;
- Resettlement of refugees;
- Making provision for water storage facilities;
- Assisting with reconstruction of damaged buildings;

To the best of our knowledge the issue of women and their role in Disaster Management has been overlooked. It is, therefore, proposed that a core group of female representatives in the international community be convened to explore in greater depth the Role of Women in Disaster Management.

The purpose of this meeting would be to develop strategies and guidelines which could be adapted/modified and implemented by women in individual countries.

It is our belief that such guidelines if followed could raise the level of a community's awareness, its state of preparedness, and improve the community's response in the event of either a natural or man-made disaster. ■