



## Why does OCHA need a gender policy?

There are several reasons. First, there is growing evidence that understanding gender relations, identities and inequalities can help improve humanitarian assistance. Not all people are vulnerable in the same way; nor do they have the same capacities. Although specifics varying from place to place, women tend to have greater responsibilities for children and the home while men have greater exposure to actors outside of the home. There can also be significant differences between women and men regarding access to education or in confidence when addressing political authorities. Understanding these differences and inequalities can help identify needs, target assistance and ensure that the needs of the vulnerable are met.

Second, there are commitments to using a gender perspective and working towards greater equality between women and men within the UN system including in the Security Council with resolution 1325 (2000), in ECOSOC resolution on gender mainstreaming, by the IASC, by governments and by international organisations engaged in humanitarian assistance. OCHA's policy is also related to fulfilling these commitments.

Third, evaluations have pointed out that gender mainstreaming has been a neglected area of humanitarian assistance. Many development agencies have a history of working on gender issues but progress has been slower in the humanitarian assistance community. Thus, there is a need to invest resources and make progress on this issue.

## What does OCHA mean by 'gender mainstreaming'?

OCHA follows the definition of 'gender mainstreaming' agreed to and used by the United Nations.

Two aspects of this definition are important. The first relates to how vulnerabilities and capacities can be different for women and men. Humanitarian assistance can have different impacts on women and men. This involves analysis, information and consultations with communities.

The second aspect of this definition of gender mainstreaming that is important for OCHA is the focus on not perpetuating inequalities. While humanitarian assistance is very different from long-term development assistance, it is often possible to ask whether or not a specific intervention widens or narrows inequalities between women and men. There is also a responsibility for humanitarians to look at issues relating to the protection of women and girls, strengthening women as decision-makers and the human rights of all.

"The strategy of mainstreaming is defined in the ECOSOC agreed conclusions, 1997/2, as "...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality".



It is true that there is often significant misunderstanding of what is meant when we say that OCHA is working to 'mainstream a gender perspective'. Common misunderstandings include that this means that OCHA is trying to make women and men the same, that women will be privileged over men, that this perspective is inconsistent with the principles of humanitarian neutrality or that this involves massive interference in local cultures or structures. These are all false.

### **The policy says 'gender mainstreaming', so why is there a focus on women and girls? I thought that gender was about women and men?**

Yes, using a gender analysis does mean looking at women and men (as well as boys and girls) and understanding their relationships, vulnerabilities and capacities. However, the focus is often on women given that there tend to be inequalities – in resources, past attention, understanding of priorities, respect of rights, etc. Therefore, it is often important to make special efforts to consult with women and girls, investigate their protection needs, and document their priorities, as these have not always been understood to date.

### **But OCHA isn't operational, so what does this policy have to do with us?**

Eventhough OCHA is not operational, much of OCHA's work can benefit from better attention to gender issues. OCHA's leadership on sexual abuse and exploitation issues is one good example of how OCHA's coordination mandate is relevant on these issues.

In terms of the Policy – OCHA's policy work can ensure that all new policies look at differential impacts on women and men. OCHA's information management function (establishing frameworks for data collection, highlighting data gaps, and providing news services) can disaggregate data by sex and provide information on crucial issues (such as women's rights, sexual and gender-based violence, women's priorities that might have been overlooked to that point, etc.). OCHA's advocacy work can also be used to bring attention to issues that are relevant when a gender perspective is used.

### **If we work on gender issues, aren't we interfering in local cultures?**

The stress in OCHA's gender policy and action plan is first and foremost on using a gender analysis to understand what is going on in a humanitarian crisis and how to best shape the response. This is not interfering in local cultures, but understanding this dimension of local cultures.

### **Gender? Women? Isn't that UNIFEM's responsibility?**

UNIFEM does have a specific mandate to work on women's issues. In addition, it has been agreed (in ECOSOC, in the General Assembly, in directives from the Secretary-General, etc.) that all UN agencies, offices, and departments have a responsibility to work with a gender perspective and understand how and where gender issues are relevant to their work. This flows from the insight that all interventions, policies and programmes can affect women and men differently, and it is important for all initiatives to understand that impact.

### **Looking at gender roles, responsibilities, inequalities, etc is very complicated? Where is OCHA staff going to get the required expertise?**

Yes, this can get complicated but there are a few basic steps that staff can take that do not require specialist expertise. First, do not make assumptions about who does what work or has a specific priority. Do not assume that all people will benefit equally from an intervention. Check out the realities of each situation. Second, encourage participatory approaches and consultations with target populations that ensure that women's voices will be heard.

If it is necessary to seek out more specialist information, there is support. Within OCHA, there is a senior gender adviser in PDSB. This person will be a resource and refer you to appropriate resources, as necessary.

Other agencies and NGOs may have gender expertise, documentation and information. Given that almost all agencies have a similar gender policy to OCHA's, they too are trying to find the best way to work on these

issues. UNIFEM runs a web portal <http://www.womenwarpeace.org> that can provide a starting point for information. There are two different UN networks that can also be approached: the Task Force on Women, Peace and Security of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and the Gender and Humanitarian Assistance Task Force of the IASC.

In many countries there is a growing network of academics, gender equality advocates, and women's organisations that can be important sources of information. Consult the Peacewomen website <http://www.peacewomen.org> for listings of organisations. OCHA field offices should know which agencies and actors have gender expertise and call on it as appropriate for technical assistance...

### **Does gender mainstreaming include efforts to have greater balance of women and men working in OCHA?**

OCHA – like many other organizations – has decided to treat these two issues separately. Gender mainstreaming refers to how OCHA works on gender issues in its substantive work. Gender balance is the term given to issues relating to staffing. Gender balance is seen as a human resources issue and is dealt with under those structures. Gender mainstreaming is seen as a policy issue.

### **Can you give me some examples of where gender issues have been important in humanitarian settings or how OCHA or other humanitarian organisations have worked on gender issues?**

- On April 28th, 2004 OCHA's report on the situation in the DRC called on support and health care for victims of systemic sexual violence. "OCHA calls for an increase in the capacity of health partners already working on the ground and the financing of new partners with expertise in sexual violence and the prevention and transmission of HIV/AIDS," the agency said in a report on the initial conclusions of a 23 April inter-agency monitoring mission to Kahungula, in the southwestern province of Bandundu. Source: [http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=40794&SelectRegion=Great\\_Lakes&SelectCountry=DRC](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=40794&SelectRegion=Great_Lakes&SelectCountry=DRC)
- In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), OCHA coordinated the collection and publication of the gender policies and priorities of humanitarian organisations active in the country. OCHA produced a booklet that was "designed to provide a clearer overview for all interested parties of the policies of international organisations, donors and NGOs on gender issues." This was a concrete step to act on the priority of gender mainstreaming into the programmes and projects of the various organisations working in DPRK, which had been consistently identified as a key initiative, by the humanitarian organisations in DPRK. See: UN- OCHA (2003). *Gender Policies of Humanitarian and Development Organisations working in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*.
- Examples from ICRC: Example 1: "In a post-conflict setting, the most vulnerable amongst the civilian population were found to be widows and female heads-of-households, often responsible for many children. These women found themselves in an extremely precarious position, with neither land nor the tools to cultivate it. Coping mechanisms were limited: begging, picking wild fruit, and, in some cases, resorting to prostitution. Lacking financial means, political support, and needing to devote their time primarily to securing means of survival, these women were generally unable to claim financial aid from the appropriate authorities. Many NGOs and development programmes did not take these women into account as investments required the payment of a warranty, which these women could not afford, in order to secure the grant of a loan.
- Example 2: "The situation of wives and girls related to men deprived of their freedom was exacerbated by the need to provide them with food and financial support. Women lost precious time for work and production due to travelling long distances to the prisons, and thus became trapped in a spiral of poverty. They sold their shelters, their animals and their belongings in order to be able to respond to the needs of those detained. It was frequently the case that one woman would be responsible for supporting several members of her family in detention.

“The ICRC granted support to women’s associations permitting them to participate in agro-pastoral programmes and to thereby restore their traditional economic activities. Their situation improved and they once again became eligible to receive credit from other institutional actors... Women also participated and were consulted in the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of the programme.” Source: ICRC Women and War team (2004). *Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict*. Geneva: ICRC.

- There were reports from western Ethiopia that young Sudanese men fleeing conscription continued to starve in refugee camps despite receiving prompt shipment of food aid. The food they were given needed to be cooked before it could be eaten, and as men, they had never learned to cook. Source: WHO (2002). *Gender and Disasters*. [http://www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf)
- “From December 2000 to January 2001, UNHCR deployed Emergency Response Teams (ERT) to both Guinea and Sierra Leone. To enhance the gender-sensitivity of the teams, the Office of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality and the Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit of UNHCR deployed a Gender Adviser to serve as part of the ERT. The deployment was a first in UNHCR’s history... In Guinea, the Gender Adviser’s work focused on UNHCR’s ongoing operations to relocate refugees from Languette to safer sites inside the country. The Gender Adviser and ERT ...[worked] to ensure that services and facilities... [responded] to the needs and priorities of both women and men. Emphasis...[was] placed both on influencing the establishment and management of camp level structures and on protection activities. Source: UNHCR (2001). *Good Practices. A Practical Guide to Empowerment. Refugee Women/Gender Equality Unit*. <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home?page=PROTECT&tid=3b83a48d4>
- “Studies in Bangladesh show that women suffered most following the 1991 cyclone and flood. Among women aged 20-44, the death rate was 71 per 1000, compared to 15 per 1000 for men. Since emergency warnings were given mainly by loudspeaker and word of mouth, women’s lower literacy does not explain these findings. Other factors lay behind women’s higher mortality. In a highly sex-segregated society, warning information was transmitted by males to males in public spaces where males congregated on the assumption that this would be communicated to the rest of the family - which by and large did not occur. Those who heard the warning ignored it because cyclones occurring after the 1970 disaster had not caused much devastation. In the ensuing procrastination, women who had comparatively less knowledge about cyclones and were dependent on male decision-making, perished, many with their children, waiting for their husbands to return home and take them to safety. Those reaching shelters found them ill designed and insensitive to gender and culture specific needs. Not only were large numbers of men and women huddled together - a rarity in a culture of seclusion - but the shelters lacked separate toilets, water, toiletries like sanitary pads, thus reducing privacy levels. This especially enhanced the discomfort of menstruating, pregnant and lactating women. Women’s saris restricted their mobility. Women were malnourished compared to men and physically weaker.” *Challenging Boundaries: A Gender Perspective on Early Warning in Disaster and Environmental Management*. EGM/NATDIS/2001/EP.5. [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/env\\_manage/documents/EP5-2001Oct26.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/env_manage/documents/EP5-2001Oct26.pdf)