



Case studies on how gender mainstreaming improves humanitarian assistance

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This tool provides information and case studies on how using mainstreaming a gender perspective makes humanitarian assistance more effective.

Women and men can be vulnerable in different ways

Case 1 – Vulnerability during floods

“A sociological study on gender dimensions of floods in Northern Bangladesh shows that while women’s lives were primarily restricted to homesteads, they were engaged in economic activities such as tending home, gardens and livestock. During floods, many animals drowned and home gardens washed away. Women, unlike men could not seek outside work. They also had to meet their responsibilities for acquiring fuel wood and water, which became nearly impossible for them. Cultural restrictions also prevented women from participating in distribution of relief supplies or economic assistance...”

Understanding gender norms and differences can help uncover cause/effect linkages

Case 2 – Soap and girls attendance at school

“In July 2000, UNHCR ran out of money to purchase soap for the approximately half a million refugees in Tanzania. No one realized how far-reaching the impact of lack of soap would be on the Congolese and Burundian refugee populations, especially on girls and women. A year later, after the first soap delivery, the ramifications are becoming clearer.

Aside from being necessary to maintain personal hygiene, important in the prevention of infections and health problems, soap is also used for washing clothes, hair, and keeping children - who love to play in the red dirt of the camp-clean. For young women especially, having soap is crucial for maintaining hygiene, which is necessary to attend school.

One community service organisation stated that around the time soap delivery stopped; adolescent girls began dropping out of school. The combination of lack of soap, sanitary materials and clothing made girls feel ashamed of going to school, especially during their menstrual periods. In some camps, between fourth and fifth grade, two thirds of girls drop out of school.”

Women can be particularly hard-hit by the social impacts of environmental disasters (and these impacts are not always taken into consideration by humanitarian workers).

Case 3 – Gender impact of natural disasters

“While natural disasters often impact human communities very broadly, residents are not equally at risk of loss and harm nor equally able to recover. Poor households are well-known to be especially vulnerable but gender-specific effects are also suggested, for example by such indicators as:

- Post disaster mortality, injury, and illness rates which are often (but not universally) higher for girls and women;
- Economic losses which disproportionately impact economically insecure women (e.g. agricultural losses of women farmers, the destruction of women’s home-based businesses, limited access to post disaster economic aid);



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- Work load changes which suggest that disasters increase women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere, paid workplace, and community through the disaster cycle of preparation, relief, reconstruction, and mitigation;
- Post disaster stress symptoms which are often (but not universally) reported more frequently by women;
- Increased rates of sexual and domestic violence against girls and women in disaster contexts."

Family roles and responsibilities change during crisis

Case 4 – Changing roles post-crisis: volcano in the Philippines

"In the Philippines, following the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1994, women's workloads increased considerably. Women are normally responsible for ensuring there is food on the table. However, when families lost their harvest and women lost their kitchen gardens as a result of the volcanic eruption, women needed money to buy food.

"Male migration increased substantially following the eruption as men had to go elsewhere to look for jobs. Women were obligated to make money by taking in laundry (in addition to washing their own family's clothes) and cooking enough at family mealtimes to sell on the side. Women also tried to find domestic work. All this placed an extra burden on women who had even fewer resources and facilities than before."

Consulting with women and involving them in the planning can help 'get initiatives right' the first time.

Case 5 – Who makes decisions about resources?

"Women and girls in a country in West Africa walked long distances, through conflict-stricken areas, to collect water but seldom had enough for their domestic needs. To improve the health of the family and the protection of women and girls, a water source closer to the village was proposed. However, as custom dictated, discussions were held with the men of the village to determine the construction and location of the water source.

"After its construction was complete, it became apparent that the means of accessing the water had to be adapted for the women who were actually using it. For example, the short-handled hand pump had to be replaced with a long-handled pump to enable women and girls of less physical strength to use the water source. In addition, the involvement of women proved invaluable, as it was ultimately the women using the water facility who were most conscientious about maintaining it and keeping it in a good state of repair."

Humanitarian assistance can also affect social relationships

Case 6 – Impact of gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance on women

While witnessing a very vocal meeting of rural women in Srirampur, Orissa, about a year and a half after the cyclone of 1999, I was informed by NGO there that before the cyclone, women would rarely come out and interact on social issues, let alone interact with outsiders. This changed after the cyclone, because relief packages of most NGOs, and even the government, were targeted at, or through, women. That phase really empowered them, made them amenable to interacting on social issues and also increased their self-esteem and their status within their families and society.

What are the factors which lead to women's empowerment that is sustainable and gender equitable? The one that clearly stands out is control over resources. The Orissa example is one where the fact that women received the family relief kits, house building grants, loans and memberships, and passed on the benefits to the families, made all the difference.