

THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN
IN DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

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Preface

The Disaster Research Unit (DRU) of the University of Manitoba was commissioned by Intertect Training Services, based in Madison, Wisconsin, United States of America, to prepare a "Desk Study on the Needs of Women and Children in Emergency Situations". This work is being conducted for the Disaster Management Training Programme of the United Nations Development Programme and Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator.

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Executive Summary

THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

1. The principal objective of this report is to provide a general overview of the problems arising from the presence of women and children in disasters and emergencies. Other objectives are to address the gender bias in disaster-related research, the critical analysis of established roles of women and children, the attention needed by operational agencies to the special needs of women and children, and the integration of the report findings with disaster-related research in general. Given the current status of this field, the report also addresses how to build effectively on existing experience and mechanisms for mobilizing women toward greater preparation in facing disasters and emergency situations. An action-oriented framework offers a schematic representation for the integration of findings into the larger research programme on disasters and emergencies.
2. The problem of women and children in the broad context of disasters and emergencies has only recently been addressed. Gender usually has not been a conscious criterion employed by relief agencies to effectively assist the so called "vulnerable groups" in their special needs when an emergency or disaster occurs. Vulnerability of women is a fact, based on the larger number of women and women-headed households in emergencies and on the responsibilities borne by women related to the stability of the domestic group. Vulnerability, from this perspective, is primarily cultural and organizational. Children are particularly vulnerable due to their needs for emotional and physical security. Natural disasters and emergencies produce orphans, single-parent families and also large numbers of unaccompanied minors. Vulnerability can be minimized if adequate measures of assistance and physical and legal protection are adopted.
3. A thorough methodology should be developed to identify vulnerable groups and to assess the extent of their vulnerability. This assessment can be accomplished by distinguishing each group's ability to recover from disruptions due to disasters and emergencies.
4. To facilitate analysis of women and children, a temporal model of disaster response is presented. It can be readily linked to other models involving analysis of hazard, disaster, and development questions. An important distinction must be made between pre-disaster, the phase in which the prevailing conditions in most developing societies have generally impeded local formation of institutions to enhance disaster preparedness, and the crisis generated upon impact of disaster. The resulting social disruption makes the crisis phase one of the most severe in the emergency spectrum. Disruption may include the immediate forced relocation to shelters, an incomplete

assessment of the danger of the situation, and an awareness of the loss of loved ones and friends. The combined action of these elements indiscriminately affects men, women, and children. Discrimination against women, particularly against girl children, is more noticeable during the crisis phase, when limited resources in disaster areas are in dispute, especially in developing countries. Relief agencies urgently need to address the integration of women as primary distributors of emergency rations. Current and future assistance plans need to incorporate women into the decision-making process of camp environments in emergencies and disasters. Women should be seen as partners when interacting with men during an emergency or disaster response.

5. The need to enhance women's associations in developing economies during disasters and emergencies is identified. Associations are built up in some societies to respond to particular needs. Societies with strong indigenous associations have an organizational base for response to disaster and emergencies. Often these associations function to cross-cut kin groups, serving to balance dominating and economic forces.
6. In many emergency or disaster situations physical and emotional losses are so severe and traumatic that stress levels interfere with recovery. Widespread subordination of women has meant that women typically must bear more stress than men. Children are also affected by stress particularly when they have to adapt to life with a single parent or with no parent. Sexual abuse directed at children is common. Because of their immaturity, children do not possess the coping strategies of adults to fight stressors. Child-abuse preventive measures need to be adopted. To assess stress levels, a practical field tool is discussed.
7. Disruption of social relations through emergency displacement can mean the loss of security and protection. Due to the prevalent absence of employment opportunities and the high incidence of woman-headed households among the displaced, increasing numbers of women and girls are forced into socially unacceptable forms of wage labour. In some countries, many displaced women may end up as prostitutes, hoping to gain income to sustain their families. The longer the situation of unemployment remains unresolved, the greater the likely incidence of prostitution. The magnitude of both physical and mental abuse arising out of the sexual exploitation of displaced women and girls has not been adequately documented.

1 INTRODUCTION

Terms of reference

This study is to address the unique needs and roles of women and children in emergencies and disasters. It is designed to build on existing experiences and mechanisms for mobilizing women in emergency situations. A temporal analysis of the disaster response provides the framework for identifying the differential impacts of disaster on women in different stages of their life cycles. It also provides the framework for analyzing the effects of material and social losses such as protection, nutrition, shelter, and health care, and assessment of consequent needs. The role of women in food distribution and possible intervention strategies are also addressed. This study is action-oriented with a view to fully integrate its findings into the current research on disasters.

Status of research on disaster-subjected women and children

Contemporary disaster research has been characterized by generalizations on disaster response, ignoring in most cases reference to gender. An early study discussing the urgent need to investigate women and development issues dates back to the early 1970's. A review of the literature over the last twenty years resulted in few gender references in relation to the magnitude of the problem of disasters and the balanced demographic ratio of women and men in developing areas. Few papers available to operation agencies have focused on gender distribution, particularly women and their dependent children. Indeed, as late as Drabek's (1986) monumental survey, the paucity of generalization about women and children in disaster is striking. The word "women" is not even a topic in the index of this survey. The terse summaries of gender variation, focused mainly on hazard perception, are limited to North American and Japanese cases.

Any preliminary analysis of the disaster-related literature reveals an asymmetrical distribution of gender-themes. Research literature indicates the absence of statistics on women and children. Recent reports provided by consultants working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identify the same gap. *The problems of women and children in emergencies still need to be urgently addressed and integrated into the mainstream of research and subsequent strategic planning.* Relevant agencies should have access to findings based on sound methodology and solid data. Two recent but extensive reports prepared for UNDP exemplify the gap. In the first report (a Training Module), the only reference related to the above issue was a paragraph emphasizing the differential sex ratio in displaced adults. The measures are generalized without consideration of most vulnerable segments, namely, women and children of various ages, including adolescents, elderly, and disabled. While the majority of displaced adults are women, most programmes for relief are characterized by a distinct male bias in that they work through formal channels commonly

dominated by men. A second report, describing the cyclone disaster response in Bangladesh, drew attention to the absence of statistics on sex distribution across all phases of this recent disaster. It explained that time was unavailable for the consultant to rectify the problem. Attention should be given to more accurate assessment of the most vulnerable segments of displaced populations, as well as to means for reaching these segments with relief.

Disaster literature on women and children is only recently expanding. *This research points to the need for a thorough understanding of the pre-disaster familial responsibilities of women, responsibilities that are magnified by the onset of a disaster or emergency* (Anderson and UNHCR Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women, 1991). These responsibilities include production (women as providers earning an income), reproduction (bearing and rearing children) and maintenance of the domestic group (community management, e.g., water supply, self-help programmes and collective child care). When women are performing or attempting to efficiently perform these tasks, there are no substantial differences in these tasks to those similarly performed by men. The crucial and restrictive issues are rooted in various forms of emotional, social, economic and institutional dependency. These issues are obscured by gender bias. The combined action of these variables makes essential intervention measures more difficult to identify and design.

There is significant literature on the social and institutional context of women and, to a lesser extent, of children. It offers provocative insights for a research agenda on women and children in emergencies. The current view set forth in the documents of several operational agencies, is that women are a "vulnerable group", based on the large number of women and women-headed households in emergencies and on the responsibilities borne by women related to the stability of the domestic group. *The "vulnerability of women" should be understood to be primarily cultural and organizational rather than biological or physiological.*

Children are one of women's many responsibilities. Reactions to disaster by children rarely have been discussed or systematically researched. One writer proposed that disasters caused a "diffuse fear" among persons except for children, who presumably do not understand the seriousness of the event. While assertions have been made that children experiencing disaster emergencies do not show need for psychiatric care as long as their support group holds together, Drabek's (1986) survey points clearly to the inadequacy of and weak foundation for such generalizations.

Children in emergencies are particularly vulnerable. They have a biological need for security related to attachment to the mother or caregiver, and for protection in an unfamiliar environment. Children are affected in different ways, depending on the type of disaster and the presence of support services available to the victims. For example, natural disasters are more likely to produce orphans or single-parent family structures, whereas conflict-induced disasters often result in large numbers of unaccompanied minors and whole families in refugee camps (Harrell-Bond, 1986). *The impact of any disaster is traumatic for children.* This may be due to the loss of loved ones, separation, or the implementation delay of intervention measures to alleviate stress triggered by the disaster onset and aftermath

effects. There exist various social and community networks offering emotional security to children caught in the aftermath of a disaster.

By definition, disaster implies a departure from a normal situation, yet "normal" may be detrimental to some (Torry, 1979). Natural and conflict-induced disasters are not a category of events which can be separated from the broader issues of development. Economic and political conditions in society affect vulnerability to natural disaster and are significant in producing both natural and conflict-induced disasters. This being the case, a broader framework for analysis of disasters and their impact on different social groups is needed. *Strategies to reduce vulnerability must be an integral part of long-term developmental planning.*

Definitions

Terms that are part of everyday expression are used in this report, yet they can have a variety of meanings. Key concepts are defined below as they are employed in this study.

Emergencies are those unexpected organizational, social and emotional disruptions and subsequent losses in people's normal life triggered by the sudden occurrence of conflict-induced or natural disasters.

Disasters refer to "collective stress situations that happen (or at least manifest themselves) relatively suddenly in a particular geographic area, involve some degree of loss, interfere with the ongoing social life of the community, and are subject to human management" (Gist and Lubin, 1989).

Natural disasters refer to disasters of certain magnitude caused by natural forces affecting whole populations.

Conflict-induced disasters refer to disasters produced by violent struggle or threat thereof between opposed political forces.

Displacees are persons forcibly removed from their place of normal residence by either natural disaster or human conflict-induced disaster.

Refugees are displacees forced to seek asylum in another country by conflict or fear of persecution.

Woman-headed households are those households in which a woman is deemed responsible by members of the unit and by the community, and usually this person is the main income generator for the household (see Thorn, 1991; Wiest, 1973).

Vulnerable woman-headed households generally consist of women with severely handicapped husbands and young children, handicapped women, widows, and young single women with no relatives (adapted from Thorn 1990:24).

2 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This report focuses on women and children in different phases of disaster emergencies: the immediate crisis phase, the temporary relief phase, and the longer-term reconstruction and development phase. The report also addresses pre-emergency social and cultural conditions that have a bearing on disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery (see Figure 1). *In each phase of the disaster or emergency response, this study addresses major issues that relate to women's roles in production, resource access by women, assistance to specific needs, and implications of women-headed households.*

This study identifies research needs to be developed and integrated into an action-oriented plan coordinated by UNDP/UNDRO. While our attention is to women and children in emergency situations in general, it is important to differentiate between emergencies that permit return to the homeland and those that displace people for long periods of time and produce large numbers of refugees. In general, the former are associated with natural disasters, and are addressed within the nation-state or locale. The latter area associated with conflict-induced disasters, and usually involve refugee asylum in neighbouring countries. Significant progress has been made on research and policy guidelines associated with refugee women and children (e.g., UNHCR, 1991b). Many of the findings and recommendations are applicable to natural disaster emergencies, particularly in the crisis and relief phases.

Gender bias in disaster-related research

One objective of this project is to draw attention to gender bias in the scientific literature, in project plans and reports of donor systems, and in the societies experiencing emergencies.

There is no reason to expect disaster-related research to be less gender biased than social research in general. However, in light of post-disaster sex ratios and relative vulnerability of women and children, contemporary disaster research needs to address the problem forthrightly. *Many researchers indicate that discrimination on the basis of sex is implicit in most social systems and at the heart of systematic bias in social science.* Special attention should be given not only to women but to their children, unaccompanied or as part of fragmented families generated in the onset and aftermath of disasters.

Gender bias is also characteristic of assistance programmes. Such bias does not necessarily signify open discrimination against women. Instead, the structure of programmes perpetuates the bias out of expediency as well as a deeply engrained and insidious notion of sexual difference that is part of paternalism. The bias finds comfort in the patriarchal attitudes and patronage of many societies needing assistance. Women continue to be discriminated against

due to a gender bias in donor agencies and governments, but also because women's roles in the local systems are misunderstood or poorly understood. The common Western planning misconception of men as "breadwinners" interferes with the assessment of women's contribution. Consequently, it depletes their status and wealth - "a double-barrelled impoverishment" (Langton 1984:9). *Administrative gender bias has been particularly noteworthy in the context of refugee populations, although women are also discriminated against in the process of decision making in assistance during the relief and reconstruction phases associated with disasters* (Cuny, 1991). These issues are being addressed for refugee populations by the UNHCR. We should note that there have been positive changes (UNHCR, 1991b).

Until recently, studies have rarely addressed the differences in adaptation of refugee men versus women in host countries. Seldom discussed in their own right, women refugees have been conditioned as "refugees' or migrants' wives". The resulting tendency has been to view women as preservers of tradition with low capacities for adjustment to new conditions. *The narrow assessment of refugee women and girls incapacitates personnel within camp and settlement administrations from seeing the potential of women as effective agents and mobilizers for change and social development at local, regional and national levels.*

Established roles of women and children

A second objective of this study is to identify the variety of pre-disaster roles of women and children, and discuss the implications of the established social structure for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery.

Disasters do not just happen. Their root cause is often in the severe imbalance between rich and poor countries, in the established social structure of a colonial legacy, and in age-old ethnic conflicts that take on new proportions through access to highly destructive technological weaponry. Some researchers now recognize that social institutions not only influence response to disasters but are in many instances causally related to soil erosion, floods, and famine. Hence, appreciation of the societal and cultural context is important to understand the impact of disasters.

Vulnerable people unable to meet their own needs are often the last to benefit from assistance programmes targeted at the average person (see Wilson, 1992). This is particularly so for women and dependent children.

The social structure of most societies formally relegates women and children to inferiority and dependency, increasing their vulnerability through their disempowerment. However, the actual performance of women in production and distribution differs significantly from gender ideology and role stereotypes in most societies. It is therefore essential to address these realities in order to appreciate the differential impact of disasters on women and children, and to recognize in the actions of women the potential for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery. O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner (1976) explain that vulnerability of the population is the real cause of disasters, and that vulnerability is induced by socio-economic conditions which can be modified by conscious action.

Special attention to women and children and their needs

A third objective of this study is to explain the rationale for special attention to women and children, to identify the separate needs of women and children, and to assess specifically their need for legal protection under emergency conditions.

All societies differentiate members in terms of age and sex. This differentiation is most pronounced in agrarian and industrialized state societies where the status of women and children is one of formal dependency and hence structural subordination (Sanday, 1974). Sexual discrimination and male dominance is exaggerated and even glorified in agrarian societies. It is often rationalized through religious ideologies. Historically, Islam and Christianity have been two of the greatest forces for keeping women dependent. Sexual discrimination continues in industrialized capitalist societies dependent on wage labour relations in the form of denial of domestic labour as productive, unequal access to jobs and unequal wages (Fernandez-Kelly, 1981; Wellesley Editorial Committee, 1977). It continues to be mystified in terms of biological differences, domestic labour division, and market forces. In the Caribbean, the economic crisis and "structural adjustment" politics are seriously undermining the gains of women (M. Harris, 1991; see also Mazumdar, 1984). Research has established very clearly that women's entry into the wage labour market continues to be viewed primarily as an addition to domestic responsibilities. *Women typically work in seasonal wage jobs during peak demand periods* (Arizpe and Aranda, 1981). They have accommodated themselves to situations which have remained unchanged for generations.

These historically deep and culturally diverse discriminatory ideologies often have detrimental effects on the treatment of women and children under normal societal conditions. Such conditions are worsened by the profound global polarization of poor and rich countries or regions. Implications for the treatment of women and children under disaster conditions are even more severe. *With the disruption of established male-dominated social control mechanisms, women and children are the first to be neglected and/or abused.* Women encounter strong institutional barriers to organizational efforts. *Women are less likely to organize, either out of seclusion, lack of education, or outright threat.* Fortunately, there are mounting efforts to rectify these conditions. One such effort is to highlight the roles of women in society that are instrumental in disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery, and to draw attention to examples of organizational successes in the face of social or institutional opposition.

Integration with disaster-related research in general

An International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) study focused on Central America makes the point that "... low level of economic diversification, concentrated populations in several high-risk zones, the lack of an economic and social infrastructure, and low incomes all add to the probability that a natural phenomenon will become a natural disaster" (Bolan, 1991). This study exemplifies the need for a sophisticated and broad model

to address a wide variety of natural as well as human-induced (particularly conflict) disasters, their root causes, and the sociocultural factors that impinge on preparedness and mitigation. Disaster is a social product; vulnerability is contingent upon social pre-conditions. One of the social pre-conditions is the organizational preparedness of social systems to address emergencies and disasters (see Britton, 1986).

To highlight the needs of women and children is not to extricate them from their social systems. Consequently, the models for disaster management need to be linked to development theory. These models must also be integrated with theories of behaviour that embody cultural rules and social contexts as well as global political and economic processes.

Figure 1 is a temporal model of women and children in relation to emergencies and/or disasters. The schematic representation is organized around the response phases related to emergencies and/or disasters. In short-term planning (crisis and early relief operations), substantial research needs to be conducted on women as primary food producers, receivers, and distributors, in addition to their legal protection. In medium-term planning (mitigation and recovery emphasis during relief operations leading up to a phase of reconstruction), research needs to be centred on land use and accessibility of resources. As part of long-term strategic planning (reconstruction and development), factors indicating an optimal retention of innovative measures should be identified. These factors should be investigated to allow for the fair and effective participation of women in new community decision-making roles. The importance of *integration of women* has been highlighted as essential in both the relief phase and during reconstruction and development. Specific research is addressed in the section on Recommended Research.

Figure 1.
Temporal Model of Women and Children in Response to Emergencies and Disasters



