



# Gender and Disasters

*“Both women and men are part of the same society, which, as we know, does not mean we have the same rights, education and options to manage, neither in ‘normal’ times, nor when a disaster strikes.”*  
 — Women, Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development, UNISDR Secretariat, April 2003.

**UNDP recognizes the strong relationship between gender equality and disaster resilience, and the importance of this relationship to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is necessary to include women’s and men’s voices, needs and expertise equally in disaster risk reduction (DRR), and recovery policy and programming.**

## UNDERSTANDING GENDER

Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. It determines opportunities, responsibilities and resources, as well as powers associated with being male and female. Gender also defines the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relationships between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context- and time-specific, and changeable. **Gender does not mean “women.”** However, given that women are often in a disadvantaged position in many developing, as well as developed countries, the promotion of gender equality implies an explicit attention to women’s empowerment.

## GENDER AND DISASTER

Women, girls, boys and men belonging to different age and socio-economic strata have distinct vulnerabilities, and this shapes the way they experience disaster, and also their ability to recover from it. In countries where gender discrimination is tolerated, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to natural hazards. Not only is the percentage of women and girls who die higher in these countries, but the incidence of gender-based violence—including rape, human trafficking and

domestic abuse—is also known to increase exponentially during and after disasters. Most disasters place an undue burden on women and girls who are responsible for unpaid work such as providing care, water and food for households.



Agricultural work, often performed by women, is especially subject to many types of hazards (© UN Photo/Martine Perret).

Yet, the same destructive forces of disasters also create opportunities for women as agents of change. Disasters can also provide an opportunity to redress gender disparities. For example, during the recovery period following a disaster, longstanding biases against women can be challenged by programmes that are sensitive to their needs and that involve them as equal partners in recovery work. However, if women and girls are left out of planning for disaster response or risk reduction measures, the special talents, skills and knowledge of 50 percent of the population are not capitalized upon and the needs of the most affected are unlikely to be met.

## FAST FACTS

- Disasters lower women's life expectancy more than men's, according to data from 141 countries affected by disaster between 1981 and 2002.
- Women, boys and girls are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster.
- Most of the victims trapped in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina were African-American women and their children, the poorest demographic group in that part of the country.
- Following a disaster, it is more likely that women will be victims of domestic and sexual violence; many even avoid using shelters for fear of being sexually assaulted.

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### **Men may not request assistance**

*'In 2001, the flood destroyed her and her husband's wet season rice crop. He asked [his wife] to borrow money from the private money lender so that he could buy some new seed stock and fertiliser. Her husband would not go because he felt embarrassed to talk to the money lender.'* ("Flood Impact on Women & Girls in Prey Veng Province, Cambodia," CARE International, 2002.)



In times of drought, some women spend up to eight hours a day in search for water (© UN Photo/Ky Chung).

### **Early warning systems may fail to reach women**

*'Radios and TVs are not always found in the homes of some families. In some countries (Bangladesh, among others), women who are confined to the house or family plot have no access [through] radio, TV or otherwise to warning information.'* (Elaine Enarson, "We Want Work: Rural Women in the Gujarat Drought and Earthquake," University of Colorado, 2001.)

## UNDP GENDER STRATEGY

The UNDP Gender Equality Strategy 2008-2011 embodies the strong corporate commitment of UNDP to deepen efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. UNDP promotes gender equality through gender mainstreaming—i.e., making gender equality and women's empowerment "everybody's business." A clear lesson derived from the slow progress in achieving real change in the situation of women (despite efforts over two decades) is that significant change cannot be achieved by merely adding marginal programmes for women.

The strategy that guides UNDP efforts in DRR and recovery programming and policy engagement is the Eight Point Agenda for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Crisis Prevention and Recovery from UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR). The agenda promotes gender equality in DRR initiatives and supports disaster-affected women and men to build back a more secure, egalitarian and inclusive society. In order to translate the strategy into reality, all proposals funded by BCPR are required to allocate at least 15 percent of their total budget for interventions that empower women.

## UNDP SUPPORT SERVICES

UNDP has developed a unique set of resources to assist high-risk countries in gender-sensitive DRR and recovery planning and programming.

### **Awareness and advocacy**

Creating awareness about disaster risks and vulnerabilities, as well as advocating for comprehensive risk reduction amongst all stakeholders, is central to UNDP programming.

In Belize, Guyana, Haiti, Lebanon and Pakistan, UNDP has developed early warning systems and public awareness campaigns that reflect gender considerations.

### **Analysis and review**

UNDP is currently conducting research surveys that document the gender impacts of crises in 10 high-risk countries, five of them in the disaster-prone Caribbean region. In Myanmar, UNDP is tracking 40 households affected by Cyclone Nargis to better understand the gender-differentiated impacts of disasters. In Pakistan, UNDP is developing a sectoral paper on gender and DRR. In Syria, UNDP is supporting a gender analysis of national institutional, legislative and policy frameworks. In Belize, UNDP is supporting research on the differing vulnerabilities of men and women to natural hazards, the results of which will feed into the country's nation action plan for disaster risk reduction. Assistance is also provided for a review of the specific impact of drought on women in Syria.

### **Capacity development**

Training on gender-sensitive DRR for national authorities and relevant national institutions has been undertaken at national and regional levels on various occasions. Additionally, the orientation course for all new UNDP national and regional DRR advisors now features a dedicated session on gender. Efforts are also ongoing to build on the strength of the training programmes delivered by UNDP and develop an advanced course on gender and DRR. UN Country Teams' handbooks are being updated and a training module is being developed on this issue for all UN staff.

At the community level, involving local women in disaster planning and preparedness is already underway in many countries, where women leaders, networks and community-based organizations are encouraged to take leadership roles in disaster risk management. For example, women are receiving training to participate in rescue missions and to serve on local-level disaster management committees in Belize, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan and Syria.

### **Gender-aware DRR knowledge products**

UNDP, together with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Secretariat (UNISDR)

and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), released the booklet *Making Disaster Risk Reduction Gender-Responsive: Policy and Practical Guidelines* in 2009. This publication assists in developing gender-responsive early warning systems and gender-sensitive DRR policies. In addition, UNDP has developed tools, guidance and best practices on incorporating gender into DRR, post-disaster needs assessments, and recovery programming. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, UNDP Sri Lanka collated lessons learned for promoting a gender-sensitive approach to recovery. In 2008, UNDP and the Government of India co-produced a compilation of best practices, *Women as Equal Partners: Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk Management*. UNDP also developed gender-sensitive guidance on DRR for the Latin America region, accessible at [www.americalatinagenera.org](http://www.americalatinagenera.org).

### **Gender-sensitive risk assessment**

Risk assessments, another key component of DRR, are being undertaken in a gender-responsive manner in Armenia, Ecuador, India and Pakistan. In Kyrgyzstan, UNDP is supporting the development of risk assessment software that includes gender-specific indicators. In Honduras, work is ongoing to validate the *Risk Management and Gender Equality Toolkit* for gender-focused risk prevention and emergency preparedness in rural communities.

### **Gender-responsive recovery**

In Haiti in 2008, UNDP stepped in after the country was pummeled by a devastating three-week series of hurricanes and tropical storms. UNDP recovery activities included a major livelihoods project that ensured that women had access to funds to re-start businesses, replant fields and engage productively in the Haitian economy. In Peru, following the August 2007 earthquake, UNDP post-disaster recovery support enhanced participation of women's organizations by encouraging their involvement in local risk reduction plans, and by facilitating women's access to government housing programmes and livelihoods opportunities. Women in four of Peru's most disaster-prone areas have since started an organic agriculture project, while others have undertaken a reforestation initiative to prevent landslides and floods.



## UNDP IN ACTION

### *India*

In Gujarat, a search and rescue training was organized for the village disaster management team members in the village of Vagda, as part of the joint Government of India-UNDP disaster risk management programme. Considering that previous search-and-rescue trainings attracted few women, a different mobilization strategy was devised. The district project officer contacted the Seva Nidhi Foundation, a local community-based organization (CBO). After discussion, the CBO representative suggested contacting a woman who offers training in tailoring in Vagda village, where women from surrounding villages participate in classes. They met and the district project officer explained to her the utility of teaching simple life-saving skills to women and told her about the kinds of roles women can play in small incidents, either at home or at work, and during a natural disaster. Impressed by the briefing, the tailoring instructor asked all of her friends to attend the training programme. The result was that 39 of the 66 training participants were women.

This case clearly demonstrates the crucial partnership role of local non-governmental organizations, CBOs, and women leaders for mobilizing women volunteers at community level. Furthermore, advocating for the involvement of more women, and appreciating their role at the community level, helped to neutralize initial resistance and broke the gender stereotype of search-and-rescue as a “man’s job.”

### *Macedonia*

Since 2008, UNDP has worked with the national Crisis Management Centre (CMC) in Macedonia, a country where earthquakes and floods pose serious risks. A central part of the collaboration is the inclusion of gender concerns in all CMC activities. New software for a geographic information system was developed to allow researchers to collect sex-disaggregated data, critical to learning more about the unique ways in which disasters affect women. Training on the protection of women is offered to the Macedonian Red Cross, which has uploaded the gender software application for e-learning. Due to the successful integration of gender considerations into crisis management, the project has also functioned as a catalyst for the creation of plans, strategies and documents. The National Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction has established working structures for gender issues in case of disasters and accidents. UNDP and CMC staff are working together to draft a gender-responsive national contingency plan.

This project serves as a best practice demonstrating how to move from standalone gender projects to comprehensive gender-sensitive disaster risk management projects.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[www.undp.org/women](http://www.undp.org/women)  
[www.gdnonline.org](http://www.gdnonline.org)  
[www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/)  
[www.unisdr.org/eng/risk-reduction/gender/rd-gender-eng.htm](http://www.unisdr.org/eng/risk-reduction/gender/rd-gender-eng.htm)  
[www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/disasters/en/](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/disasters/en/)

