

**Building Disaster Resilient Communities :
Learning From Community Women**

By

barriers to literacy, education, and training; constraints on health and time and leisure—the list goes on—all these combine to undermine women’s ability to anticipate, prepare for, survive, respond to, and recover from disasters. This is what gendered vulnerability means for women.

But living life as a woman also empowers women at critical junctures, from risk assessment and hazard mitigation to emergency preparedness, disaster response, and post-disaster reconstruction. The Expert Group Meeting documented the wide range of activities undertaken by women as environmental resource users and managers (not always for the better), household managers and caregivers to dependents, community leaders, and local historians of people, place, and hazard. Accounts were shared of women’s efforts to reduce social vulnerabilities and identify and mitigate environmental hazards in the communities they know best. Again and again, we learned that women build communities, promote safety, and reweave the fabric of everyday life after disasters.

Developing and strengthening women’s capacity to reduce and manage risk is not a secondary or divisive concern but an essential first step in the hard work ahead of building more disaster-resilient communities. Therefore, we called at the Expert Group Meeting for support of both scientific expertise and women’s local knowledge, and for approaches to risk reduction that support rather than undermine women’s traditional coping strategies in risky environments. We called for a more holistic, integrated, cross-sectional and multidimensional approach integrally linking gender equality, sustainable development and disaster reduction. Recognizing that there is no single ‘community,’ just as there is no unitary ‘household,’ we called for a gender perspective in community-based approaches to risk. And we called to account all the institutional actors which continue to marginalize women in development and disaster work, challenging them to end exclusionary practices which put girls and women at increased risk.

Keys to prevention: learning from local women

If the question is learning from local women about disaster prevention, an important part of the answer is about barriers to learning. We have at present no full documentation of best practices or standards which foster gender-fair disaster planning and practices, and a very full roster of unanswered research questions. We utilize an approach which separates rather than integrates disasters, global development and gender equality. It is an approach more reliant on the outside expert and sophisticated technologies than on the painfully won knowledge of people who live day in and day out in risky environments, managing risk and coping with disasters when they must. Our well-intentioned focus on humanitarian relief deflects attention from root causes, specifically unsustainable and unjust economic development priorities which privilege few and rob many thousands of people every year of life and livelihood.

Documenting women’s local efforts to reduce and manage risk is one step forward. Lacking the empirical, longitudinal and comparative research needed to ask and answer important questions about women and men as risk managers, we swapped stories—just a few of which I have time to share with you today. Most were not about women in emergency management (though this is an important topic) but spoke to local women’s proactive efforts at every phase of the disaster process.

Risk assessment

Mapping Risk through Women's Eyes: Action Research in the Caribbean

Four women's CBOs in the Dominican Republic and St. Lucia are winding up the first of a two-year project to map risk in their communities, including the daily disasters that shape low-income women's lives and the hurricanes, landslides, and fires to which they are exposed. With training in basic research methods, the community women used interviewing, photo essays, risk mapping and other techniques to assess vulnerabilities and capacities. This information will be compiled in community vulnerability profiles, written guidelines for conducting vulnerability research with women's CBOs, and a bilingual, practice-oriented guidebook for working with women to reduce risk in the Caribbean. The community researchers will also be trained to work with other groups, agencies, and governments as informal community vulnerability educators. [Adapted from E. Enarson, proposal to the Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Relief, University of South Florida, 2001.]

Environmental hazard mitigation

Technological Innovation in Bangladesh: Women Farmers Reducing Risk

In Bangladesh, women *char*-dwellers increase food security through homestead gardening and food processing and storage, and preserve the seeds of a great variety of food crops and vegetables. Composting kitchen waste provides soil-enriching fertilizer. Women here also preserve rainwater by coating the pits they dig with cow dung, and select fast-growing seedlings to make *char* soils more stable. They prepare for floods by securing fodder for their livestock and planting trees around the low houses they build with local materials and cross-bars for wind protection. [Adapted from M. Chowdhury, "Women's technological innovations and adapchar

men. [Adapted from Inter-American Development Bank, Sustainable Development Department Technical Papers Series, 'Hurricane Mitch: women's needs and contributions.' 1999.]

Women for Development: Preparing for Earthquakes in Armenia

Nine years after Armenia's destructive 1988 Spitak earthquake, a small group of women scientists organized Women for Development to help reduce women's social vulnerabilities to earthquakes. One important project was the training of primary and middle-school teachers and pupils in seismic protection skills ("don't be scared, be prepared!"). The group also helped local and regional governments plan for coordinated quake response, and designed mass media campaigns highlighting women. This conveyed "a new positive type of woman, who is not only silently carrying the heavy results of the disasters but is also ready to provide her knowledge and ability for disaster mitigation." [Adapted from A. Mikayelyan, "Earthquake mitigation from a gender perspective in Armenia." Paper prepared for the EGM in Ankara, 2001.]

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“The Oxfam Women” in Zambia

During the drought of the

From Disaster to Development: Building on Women's Experience in India

Following the 1993 earthquake in Latur, a network of women's groups and rural organisations organized by Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) became "community consultants" interfacing between impacted communities and government to promote the kinds of disaster relief that advanced long-term community development. Grassroots women also trained in safe housing construction techniques, monitored the long housing reconstruction process, and helped redesign new homes to better suit women. This work led SSP to Turkey after the 1999 Marmara earthquake, where they shared their experiences with women's groups there. Back home, over 100 women leaders traveled to Gujarat following the 2001 quake to demonstrate the technical and political skills gained in the Latur earthquake. SSP also helped construct housing and community centers in Gujarat. [Adapted from Redesigning Reconstruction (April 2001), publication of the Swayam Shikshan Prayog, and from P. Gopalan, "Responding to earthquakes: people's participation in reconstruction and rehabilitation." Paper prepared for the EGM in Ankara, 2001.]

Foundation for the Support of Women's Work After a Turkish Earthquake

The FSWW's Women and Children Centers house savings groups, child care, income-generation projects, and other community services. The centers proved invaluable after the 1999 earthquake. Women involved in these centers mobilized in groups to conduct housing surveys about shortages and tenant needs, in addition to undertaking emergency relief. They visited local officials personally to share this information and make women's needs known. Among their achievements were more public financing for child care, more construction work for women, and regular meetings between affected women and other 'stakeholders' in the recovery process. They also inspired tenant women to organize housing coops. Working with women's CBOs from India and elsewhere, FSWW was a catalyst for shifting post-disaster activities from relief to development and for grassroots women's participation in public decision-making. [See S. Akcar, "Grassroots women's collectives' role in post-disaster efforts: potential for sustainable partnership and good governance." Paper prepared for the EGM in Ankara, 2001.]

From knowledge to action

This is not a picture of hapless women awaiting rescue by strong-armed men [think of the media images you see] but of women showing the way, looking ahead, taking responsibility. Their skills, networks, local knowledge, and informal leadership made a real difference at the local level—which is where effective risk reduction and disaster prevention is possible. These stories show women at work during the "window of opportunity" for social change following disasters. Propping this window open a bit longer is part of women's work, too.

How do we build on their knowledge and continue to link women's empowerment, community development, and risk reduction? How do we ensure that no disaster mitigation, preparedness, relief, or recovery plan is adopted (or funded) without a gender perspective, or drafted without input from grassroots women's groups knowledgeable about local vulnerabilities and capacities.

The EWG recommended, as you see in the document in hand, a number of very specific action steps for governments, policy makers, the media, educators, researchers, and civil society. But making this happen is political work—and it can't be done without women. The best GIS maps, most sophisticated emergency management plans, most highly trained scientists, and most proactive governments cannot make people safe. Safer ways of living in hazardous environments must be won, achieved through hard work at the local level by women and men.

The point is not to overburden local women or glamorize their role as environmental actors but to empower them as decision-makers and support their efforts to protect life and livelihoods. This is the spirit of Women's Action Agenda 2002, and Beijing Plus Five, and women's movements around the world. Disaster prevention needs to be taken up by women locally but also by women's movements and other activists for social justice and sustainable development. We will want to look closely for gaps and blinders in the development work undertaken by UN family of organizations and its member governments. Are disaster prevention and gender equality integral concerns? We need to think strategically about how existing treaties, conventions, and protocols can be used to bring these issues forward. For example, we need to ensure grassroots women's full and equal participation in the proposed new global treaty on disaster prevention, and in training programs within development and humanitarian relief agencies, and in governmental initiatives like FEMA's Project Impact here in the US, which currently takes a gender-blind approach to vulnerability.

Perhaps the proposed GROOTS Working Commission on Disasters and Development could take the lead, spearheading organizing along these lines—and in the other directions you will suggest:

- The ISDR promotes risk reduction around the globe, working through partnerships with governments, business and corporate leaders, scientific and technical experts, and local communities. We will want to work very closely with them on the need for a sustained analysis of gender relations as a factor in every aspect of risk reduction and risk management. More gender-specific early warning systems are a case in point.
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issues on the agenda of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees?
How can they help?

- Women's livelihoods are at risk in every disaster though their need for income is rarely addressed in pre-disaster preparedness projects or in post-disaster relief programs. The International Labour Organization is now employing a gender perspective in its programming around work and employment issues in disasters of all kinds. Can this be a model for women working with trade unions and other worker associations on disaster mitigation plans? Can Habitat address safe housing as a work issue for women in disasters, as well as a life safety issue?
- Like other sustainable development initiatives, the UN's work on Healthy Cities cannot succeed without recognizing that women are key players in the social organization of fringe urban communities, so terribly vulnerable to floods and other natural disasters. Poor urban women's inability to prepare for and mitigate hazards must be on the agenda for healthy cities. With respect to public health, we need to capitalize on women's roles as informal

Selected English-language Resources

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Byrne, Bridget with Sally Baden. 1995. *Gender, Emergencies and Humanitarian Assistance*. Report for the European Commission, Directorate General for Development.

Eade, Dianne and Suzanne Williams (eds.). 1995. *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*, Vol. 1-3. Oxford: Oxfam.

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Enarson, Elaine. 1998. Violence against women in disasters: a study of domestic violence programs in the US and Canada. *Violence Against Women* 5 (7): 742-768.

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United Nations. Division for the Advancement of Women. 2001. *Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: A Gender Perspective*. Report of the Expert Group Meeting in Ankara, Turkey (November, 2001). All documentation available online from the Division for the Advancement of Women (www.un.org/womenwatch/daw).

Walker, Bridget (ed.). 1994. Women and Emergencies. *Focus on Gender 2* (1). London: Oxfam.

Wiest, Raymond, Jane Mocellin, and D. Thandiwe Motsisi. 1994. *The Needs of Women in Disasters and Emergencies*. Report prepared for the UNDP. Winnipeg, Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Disaster Research Institute. Available on- (www.anglia.ac.uk/geography/gdn).

Special journal issues

The Macedon Digest/Australian Journal of Emergency Management 8 (4), 1993/94.

Department of Humanitarian Affairs News (November), 1997.

IDNDR, Stop Disasters (Women and Children: Keys to Prevention), Vol. 24, 1995.

Website

The Gender and Disaster Network (www.anglia.ac.uk/geography/gdn) includes downloadable papers, contact information for members, bibliographies, reports, and other resources. It also includes proceedings and action recommendations from women and disaster conferences held in British Columbia (1999) and in Miami (2000).

Videos

Living with Disaster (gender-aware profiles of communities responding to risk in Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, and Peru and Columbia). Produced by Intermediate Technology and available for purchase through Television Trust for the Environment, London, UK (www.oneworld.org/tve).

South Asian Women: Facing Disaster, Securing Life. Profiles women in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka responding to armed conflict, displacement, epidemic, and natural disaster). Produced by Duryog Nivaran, an alternative disaster and development agency in Sri Lanka with a strong gender focus, and available for purchase through their website (www.adpc.ait.ac.th/duryog).