

GENDER, DISASTER AND CONFLICT: A HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PERSPECTIVE

Overview:

The increasing occurrence of natural and human made disasters, including armed conflicts, are causing extensive loss of life, damage to property and the environment. Both conflicts and disasters have an inordinate impact on women. Women shoulder burdens as caregivers in times of crisis, they are at risk of exploitation and infringement of their rights, and inadequate support exists to protect and empower women during these critical periods.

The extreme levels of female poverty worldwide, but most notably in Africa, have increased women's vulnerability to disaster and conflict. Poor living conditions increase threats to women's security, health and well-being, economic security and livelihoods, and most importantly, limit their empowerment in the society as a whole. The empowerment of women is a key element in the overall development of communities, and in reducing the vulnerability of all to the effects of disaster and conflict.

The cycles of disaster and conflict raise another concern – the aid dependency cycle and the connected gaps between relief activities and development more broadly. The remit of DMP is to bridge this gap between relief and development. Understanding how relief and development can be linked will have a major impact on breaking the aid dependency cycle. Employing a gender perspective is a critical element in this. Considerations of the different roles and needs of men and women will improve the effectiveness of strategies aimed at making the link between relief and development. However, in addition, the process of bringing relief and development issues together will have a positive empowering impact on women, which in turn, will reduce vulnerability and dependency in the longer term.

The development of sustainable human settlements contributes to the reduction of vulnerability to the impacts of disaster and conflict. The space in which men and women live will have profound impacts on their interaction with one another and with their environment. The ability of women to access economic security can have a major effect on their ability to prevent disaster, or mitigate its impacts on their livelihoods and well being.

Involving women and understanding gender dynamics within the framework of disaster and conflict are critical for developing effective interventions. There are practical issues in terms of the involvement of women – women make up half the productive population, and have enormous capabilities within the community that should be capitalized upon to improve disaster management. However involvement of women also serves longer term goals, as it supports greater recognition of women's equal rights and value in society, and in so doing, empowers women to promote development in their communities, which in turn reduces vulnerability to disaster in the future.

“Human development cannot occur when the choices of half of humanity are restricted.”

Gender and Conflict:

During conflict, women play a variety of roles, as supporters, soldiers, mothers and wives, advocates for peace and innocent victims. However, in post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, these experiences, and the unique needs of women are often invisible. Conflict brings about extreme alterations in social dynamics. Women will have developed new coping strategies and mechanisms for interacting with society, as displaced persons or traveling with militias, or simply in the absence of men in the community. These dynamics will again be challenged in the post conflict period.

Post conflict reconstruction will present further challenges to women's involvement. A lack of gender perspectives in reconstruction will reduce the effectiveness of infrastructure and services in the community, as the needs and priorities of women are often overlooked when

women are not consulted. Reconstruction activities are often among the primary large scale activities in the post conflict phase. As such, they set the stage for social dynamics after war. The exclusion of women from the process further marginalizes them and fails to support their needs and by extension, the needs of communities.

The integration of gender in post conflict reconstruction must address the different needs of men and women within a framework of involving and empowering women. Reconstruction will have major impacts on the equal development of women and men, and most importantly, can have a positive impact on increasing access of women to resources, and reducing burdens on their time and labour.

Gender and Disaster:

Women and men play different roles in society, and as a result, have different roles in all aspects of managing disasters. The way that men and women are vulnerable to disasters will also vary based on their gender. These differences in capabilities and vulnerabilities are at the heart of a gendered perspective of disaster management. Effective management of disasters implies a focus on the relationship of a population with its environment. The way men and women behave in their different roles will increase or decrease their vulnerabilities to disasters. How they are able to access resources or information, for example, will influence their capacities to effectively prepare, prevent, mitigate or respond to disasters.

It is important for effective disaster management that these different roles, capacities, vulnerabilities and needs are recognized and considered. Employing a gendered perspective in all areas of disaster management, both in policy and practice, can achieve this.

DMP Strategy:

The different impacts of disaster and conflict, and the unique needs and capacities of women before, during and after crisis require concrete strategies to ensure that they are adequately addressed. Disaster management strategies must address gender concerns at all stages – prevention, mitigation and response – and at all levels – international, national, and local. At present, the integration of gender in policy frameworks and strategy at the national level is lacking and must be prioritized. However, the way that these strategies are put into practice at the local level is the most important, as this will have the greatest impact on reducing women's vulnerability to disaster.

Decision making structures, particularly in times of crisis such as disaster or conflict, tend to be overwhelmingly male. As such, gender concerns are often overlooked. It is important therefore that women's involvement is institutionalized at all levels, both legal and policy – in national mechanisms for disaster management, through to local disaster management and village committees. This will facilitate the reflection of women's needs as well as men's in priority setting, provision of services, urban planning and resource mobilization.

Participation of women and men equally in disaster management and in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation is also critical for effective crisis programming and for promoting gender equality more broadly.

Access to information in prevention and mitigation stages of disaster management is critical. Women are particularly effective purveyors of information, though in many cases they are excluded from information processes. It is equally important however that women are involved in and aware of channels by which they can pass information regarding their needs and priorities. As such, information mechanisms must be two way and accessible for equal inclusion of women's and men's voices.

As displaced persons, women are particularly vulnerable to **loss of property**. Upon return, without accessible systems to provide information about their rights as well as

provide legal services, women often have little choice in land ownership. As such, women become further impoverished and marginalized after the disaster or conflict. The lack of such systems also perpetuates inequality between women and men in a broader social sense as it reflects the lower status and value placed on women in a particular society.

During disasters such as floods, traditional boundaries demarcating land are often destroyed. Women face particular difficulty reasserting their rights to their lands, especially as widows and other household heads. As female heads of households, this group is one of the most vulnerable. The inability to control land and property further constrains their ability to recover after disaster, and increases their vulnerability to disasters in the future. This is an area that can be addressed in the planning and management of resettlement and reconstruction of human settlements.

During the **reconstruction** phase, development of infrastructure and re-establishment of **basic services** will be a priority. This development will have a major impact on women's lives, in terms of their access to the services that they need the most, the amount of time it will take them to carry out their daily activities and so forth. These then have broader linkages to issues such as security – prioritizing alternative sources of fuel in post-disaster/conflict for example, can protect women from possible threats to their personal safety and sexual and gender based violence. Such examples further highlight the connections between human settlements and women's well being in a variety of ways. It is therefore important that women are consulted during the planning process in reconstruction.

Sexual and gender based violence are especially prevalent in times of crisis – both in disaster and conflict. Protection of women from abuse should not only be viewed in terms of legal protection and counseling services. The design and management of human settlements can have a profound impact on the ability of women to protect themselves, the prevalence of the violence and their ability to seek redress and protection.

This also extends to the protection of women from the spread of **HIV AIDS**, which is also exacerbated during crisis. For example, living conditions and lack of privacy in displacement camps can lead men to seek partners elsewhere, thus bringing and spreading disease when they return home. Development of suitable settlements in displacement areas during disaster can have a positive impact on slowing these effects.

Conclusion:

Times of disaster and conflict leave populations in situations of crisis and upheaval. The way that men and women experience these crises are very different. Disaster and post conflict programming must, at its heart, seek to support populations to cope, recover, rebuild, and protect themselves against future threats. In order to do this, the different roles and capacities of men and women must be recognized, considered and built upon in the wider context of human development strategies. Thus, linking gender with disaster and post conflict programming is central for the connections between relief and development. These linkages will, in combination, help to promote reduction of vulnerability of whole populations, both women and men, to future risks, and promote gender equality and human development more broadly.