

TAKING GENDER CONCERNS SERIOUSLY

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING THE DIFFERENT NEEDS OF WOMEN, GIRLS, BOYS AND MEN IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

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When people talk about disasters, there is a tendency to think of them as being the great equaliser. The devastating wave, the debilitating drought, or the sudden earthquake, are seen as unifying moments where societies suffer as one, and unite in their response – rich and poor, young and old, men and women.

The reality, however, is often strikingly different.

Consider the following facts.

In natural disasters, women tend to die in much larger numbers than men. During the Asian tsunami, for example, three times as many women lost their lives.

In conflict, by contrast, men tend to die in larger numbers as a direct result of conflict – but women and girls die due to indirect causes, as they are left extremely vulnerable, have less access to health care, struggle to maintain households alone, and find themselves prey to sexual violence (Plümper and Neumayer 2006).

In crises that displace a large number of people, the burden of care tends to overwhelmingly fall on women; although, they often also find more opportunities to develop their skills, and become leaders.

In refugee camps, young men and the children they look after often find themselves increasingly malnourished, as they fall through the gaps, without basic cooking skills or the ration cards to receive food.

Women, girls, boys and men are affected very differently by humanitarian crises and, as a result, need to be assisted in different ways. This is what we mean when we talk about the gender dimensions of a humanitarian emergency.

Unfortunately, many people do not understand this. This is why DARA's Humanitarian Response Index 2011 report is an important contribution to increasing awareness and understanding of the importance of addressing gender concerns in emergency situations.

The findings and conclusions from the Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) field research to crises such as Haiti, Somalia, Pakistan and Sudan, along with its analysis of donor governments' policies and funding practices related to gender equality, show that there are still significant gaps in understanding the importance of gender issues by all actors, donors and humanitarian organisations alike. Much more needs to be done to mainstream gender into all aspects of humanitarian actions, not simply because we have made many statements and commitments in this regard, but because it is one of the most powerful and effective means to ensure humanitarian actions are based on objective assessments of needs, and provided in ways that do not discriminate against any portion of a crisis affected population.

The HRI findings are not new, but they add new evidence to back up what we already know. For example, a recent study by the UN's Office on Inspection Services found that more than 50 percent of UN staff do not understand how to implement gender-responsive programmes –many believe it is purely about supporting women's programming (Muir, Jogoo and Rieper 2010).

Paying attention to women's needs is, of course, essential. But gender is a broader concept. It looks at how society works, who has the power and what roles different members of the society have. It helps us to understand the profoundly different ways in which men and women experience the same events, and to identify the different responses needed to

keep them alive and healthy and to ensure their dignity in crisis situations. Unfortunately, even where these differences are recognised and understood, aid agencies too often continue to deliver assistance as if one size fits all. In the heat of the moment, humanitarian organisations often rush in and begin to provide aid without differentiation - rather than targeting specific items to people with specific needs.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, a 2010 study conducted in North Kivu found that women did 75 percent of the work in producing food — but that the assistance provided by agricultural aid agencies (such as tools, seeds and training) went to the household – with no indication of how the aid was distributed once it came into the home. This meant that their aid was not always going where it was most needed.

Similarly, after the 2004 Asian tsunami, most of the humanitarian assistance initially went to men, who were provided fishing boats and nets. No one asked what women needed, or how to support them to get back to work. A more gender-sensitive response would have meant rebuilding market stalls and providing goods to restart trading.

GETTING THE DATA RIGHT

Tackling this gap between understanding and response is one of the most important challenges affecting the aid industry today. In her foreword to this report, Michelle Bachelet, the head of UN Women, makes a compelling case for a more concerted approach to gender equality.

As Emergency Relief Coordinator, part of my job is to identify practical and effective measures to help make this happen — simple interventions which have been shown to have a powerful impact on the way we help people.

The most important starting point is for humanitarian organisations to recognise the differing needs of men and women in the data they collect at the beginning of a disaster. Ideally before.

A recent study by the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, supported by OCHA and CARE, provides powerful examples of how early gathering of sex- and age-disaggregated data can make a real difference (Mazurana, Benelli, et.al 2011). For example, in DRC in 2011, data on malnourished children was initially not broken down by girls and boys. A gender advisor urged a closer look and the new analysis showed that more boys than girls were malnourished, - but more girls than boys were coming to supplemental feeding centres. Aid agencies working in the nutrition sector were surprised at this finding and revised their plans accordingly.

ASSESSING EVERYONE'S NEEDS

Getting the right data at the right time, however, may require a fundamental rethink of how many aid agencies do business. In the immediate aftermath of an emergency, the first priority is to determine what people need. What is the scale of the problem? Who has been affected?

We must make sure that women and men participate on assessment teams, as men are unable to speak to women or children in many places where we work. If women are not heard, their voices are crowded out. It is men's needs and men's voices that will be heard. We must do more to ensure a balance of women and men on assessment teams and train all those conducting needs assessments to understand how to collect information from women and men.

Once needs have been assessed, and the aid starts flowing, humanitarian responders must also do more to measure how their interventions are affecting men and women differently. There is an overwhelming tendency to report numbers in bulk – latrines built, tons of food distributed, school rehabilitated – without knowing who used those latrines, who ate the food and who went to school.

If a health centre reports, for example, seeing 5,000 clients a month, humanitarian responders cannot tell whether there are more women than men accessing its services and whether there are specific issues to be resolved around men's or women's access to health care. This can have grave implications.

In Pakistan, in 2009, the health cluster was not initially disaggregating data by sex for those using the clinics. Had they done so, they would have found that women did not go to male health care providers and had less social mobility to be able to go to health centres. This was noticed by the media and the gender team. As a result, action was taken to provide female health care workers and mobile clinics. In addition, sanitation facilities were improved by adding purdah walls – protective barriers in front of the latrine so that women would use them safely and with privacy.

Similarly, if a school states that it has 2,000 students, it is not clear if there are more boys than girls attending that school, or if more girls than boys are dropping out. In Somalia, for example, data showed that fewer than 40 percent of children were attending schools — girls slightly less than boys. But the aid agencies dealing with education initially only focused on why girls were not attending, and did not look into why boys were dropping out. This caused a backlash in the community, as female education was seen as a western concern. It was decided to take a more balanced approach, by helping more boys, as well as girls, attend school. This approach won more local support.

Peter Walker, director of the Feinstein Centre, recently said: 'If I had to put my finger on one thing that will improve programming, in terms of return for your dollar, euro or yen, I would say it is collecting and analysing sex-and-age disaggregated data.'

As the HRI report suggests, donors can help promote this by requiring this kind of data regularly from their partners, not just in the project design stage, but in monitoring and following up. Here, a crucial question that all actors should be asking is what does this data tell us about different needs, and how are we using the data to guide and inform our approaches to interventions so that we can adequately address those needs.

IMPROVING THE WAY WE DO WORK

An important recent step in improving the way we think about gender in emergencies was the introduction of the IASC Gender Marker — a coding system attached to project proposals which measures whether those proposals take account of differences in needs. A simple ranking of 0, 1 or 2 is attached to projects submitted as part of the Consolidated Appeals Process or pooled funding mechanism. The code is also recorded online, on OCHA's Financial Tracking System (FTS).

Analysis of the use of the Gender Marker in 20 countries in 2012 indicated dramatic improvement in the number of projects submitted to the CAPs and Pooled Funds effectively addressing gender issues, and a commensurate decrease in 'gender-blind' projects (i.e.: projects that code 0 on the Gender Marker coding system). Out of over 2000 projects submitted to the 2012 CAP, only 10% of projects were coded 0. Just under 50% were designed to address gender equality. But, as the HRI analysis of funding patterns show, there is still significant room for improvement as it is imperative to implement gender responsive programmes – not just strengthen project design. The data shows that a significant proportion of donor funding is not aligned to meeting gender criteria, and in some crises, gender issues are largely absent in project proposals and funding allocations.

Many donors have said that they find the Gender Marker a useful tool to assess projects. The Swedish International Development Agency, for example, recently announced that it would use it when making its funding decisions. If, as the HRI report recommends, more donors make it clear they will only fund projects that address gender concerns, more aid agencies will take gender seriously.

LEADERSHIP ON GENDER COUNTS

Improving systems is only part of the process. Stronger leadership, knowledge and expertise are also needed to address gender gaps during emergency responses. Busy programme managers and cluster coordinators often find it difficult to juggle a long list of competing demands, and gender can fall down or off the agenda, as many of the examples from the HRI field research show.

To keep these issues at the centre of programming, a pool of gender experts was created – known as the Gender Standby Roster (GenCap). Since 2007, 57 GenCap Advisers have been deployed to 30 crises to help emergency response leaders design and implement services that acknowledge the different challenges facing men and women of all ages.

A special handbook and e-learning training course, "Different Needs Equal Opportunities", also offer a number of practical suggestions about how to respond to the distinct needs of women, girls, boys and men. The recent establishment of UN Women offers even more opportunities to strengthen understanding of gender concerns during crises and to improve coordination.

A final and essential step to tackling gender in crises is to do much more when preparing for future emergencies. Women, for example, are often very active in community-based disaster preparedness organisations. At higher levels, however, men still dominate. National disaster management authorities need to do more to engage with women's networks, which play such an important role in crisis response.

In Tuvalu, when a drought threatened to leave thousands of people stranded without water, the UN contacted the government division responsible for women's affairs and discovered that they were eager to be involved in the response, but had not been included in the government's disaster management planning processes.

Gender can also be more effectively addressed during disaster simulations. An example of how this can work well was seen this September, during a Pacific Humanitarian Team simulation. During the exercise, Pacific Island women provided essential information and suggestions to the simulation managers, allowing them to embed gender and social issues into the scenario.

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I want to encourage donors to take a more active stance, placing gender concerns at the heart of humanitarian action. Donors can play a crucial role by demanding that aid agencies use a comprehensive gender analysis to inform programming. The findings and recommendations from the HRI report deserve thoughtful consideration.

Understanding the differing needs of women, girls, boys and men is the responsibility of all humanitarian workers. Without it, we will fail in our responsibility to the people we are seeking to help. Identifying and addressing these distinct needs enhances humanitarian programming and puts participation of everyone in the affected population and accountability by humanitarian actors for their actions to women, girls, boys and men affected by crises centre stage.

We cannot wait any longer to get this right.

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