WOMEN AT THE FRONT LINE - reducing disaster risk

Women play a primary role in providing assistance to their family and the community in disaster prevention activities, as well as during and after disasters. However, the crucial role women play in sustaining household and community economies and social networks is not often fully recognised. Gender equality is, thus, an important aspect in disaster risk reduction. Without it no sustainable risk reduction can be achieved.

GENDER AND DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Cordaid wants to mainstream and further intensify a solid gender sensitive perspective in its disaster risk reduction objectives. Implicit to Cordaid’s community managed disaster risk reduction programme people are involved that reflect the composition of the community: men, women, young people, elders and more. Still, getting women involved appears at times challenging. If women are present in certain committees, this does not necessarily mean that they are actively contributing. The challenge then remains to assure women are actually actively participating.

One solution that Cordaid has implemented is to set up separate women’s committees. Amongst themselves, women often feel more comfortable to raise their voice. A representative of the women’s committee, for example an older, powerful woman, can then reflect the opinion of the women when discussing disaster risk reduction with other village committees.

CASE STUDY BIHAR, INDIA

In 2007, Cordaid started its community managed disaster risk reduction in flood prone Bihar. This district is situated in the plains neighboring Nepal, in the Himalaya river basin, and is frequently suffering from flooding. The heaviest floods occurred the last 30 years. In Bihar it is unusual for a woman to engage in public activities outside the confines of her home. Therefore, most women were not involved in the activities from the outset.

Cordaid’s local partner BDSSS had to convince the men that the women had to be more actively involved, as a member of BDSS explains: “We talked about why it was better to be prepared for floods than to be dependent on relief aid and how important women were in this process. They take care of the provision for the families and can take care of health matters. Slowly they started to understand and women were seen to participate increasingly.” The participating Bishop of the area, added: “Women are not only participating in the community, they actually take the lead. They stand at the front line, while earlier they did not even come out of their houses.”
A good example of such an engaged woman is Hatzina, who became part of the rescue team: “We now have more knowledge about disasters and what we should do in case of a flood. We are not dependent on gifts anymore, we can manage ourselves. During the last flood, we packed things into plastic to preserve them. A lot of important documents were saved this way. We also helped people to get to the embankments safely. We boiled cotton in water so it was hygienic enough to package food in it.”

For Hatzina the main gain from this project was that the community became united in their fight against the water. “We are not just individuals fighting the water anymore, as one we are now prepared. For example, when someone gets diarrhea, we now know how to make medicine of purified water with salt and sugar. We also cut the grass in advance, to feed to the cattle during the flood. This really helped saving our cattle.”

An older lady of Hatzina’s community was rescued by the rescue team: “During the last flood, there was so much water, the water came up to my armpits. I could not make it to the embankments in time, I held on to a branch until somebody came to save me. Luckily, the rescue team saved me in time.” In Hatzina’s community, two healthy children were born during the last flood. A woman trained by the programme in giving birth assistance helped deliver them.

These are examples of the vital role women play in disaster risk reduction in their community. Before, the relation between women in the community was not as strong, now however they are empowered to save themselves and their livelihoods in times of disaster.

About Cordaid
In emergency situations, the poorest are often the most vulnerable. Cordaid (Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development) believes that the people hit hardest by disasters know best where the threats are, what they can do about them, and what support they need to better protect themselves. Thus, Cordaid works with local organisations and authorities to support communities to identify disaster risks themselves - both from natural hazards and man-made hazards (e.g. conflict) - and to work on preventive and mitigation measures. This community managed disaster risk reduction (CMDRR) approach, increases communities’ resilience, prevents or mitigates disasters and safeguards their lives and livelihood assets. For more information, visit www.cordaid.nl.