



Gender Note # 2

Women, Gender & Disaster: Hazards and Hazard Mitigation

Mitigation is women's work, too. Around the world, women strive to reduce disaster risk by reducing the hazards to which they and their families are exposed, using both local and specialist knowledge. Constraints on women's time, resources, and energies that reduce their capacity to mitigate hazards should be addressed and their potential as leaders and change agents supported.



Growing seasonal crops to support family in drought prone region of Sri Lanka. Credit: Practical Action

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.

Source: Adapted from M. Chowdhury, 2001

Selected Trends and Patterns

- Exposure to natural hazard events that often disproportionately affect girls and women
- Increased variability and uncertainty in weather conditions strongly affecting rural women food producers
- Degraded water quality and water scarcity increasing burdens on women's time, health, safety & education
- Increased vector borne diseases and rising demands on women as formal and informal health care providers
- Nanotechnologies which may threaten women's reproductive health
- Increasing use of nuclear energy with attendant risks of failure and serious impacts on reproductive health
- Decreased state support for hazard mitigation reliance on women as social "shock absorbers"
- Global fiscal crisis undermining women's economic security worldwide & reducing their resources for mitigation

Challenges

Leadership and activities of women in hazard identification & mitigation under-estimated
Sex- and gender-specific hazard effects endangering women/men respectively poorly documented
Extension programs do not reach women producers consistently with current methods and tools
Lack of support for women's & community groups engaged in or desiring hazard mitigation
Limited alternatives for self-supporting women in extreme poverty whose actions may degrade the environment
Continuing over-direction of resources to emergency response and structural mitigation
Lack of sex- and age-specific data and gender analysis in hazard assessments leading to mitigation projects

Talking Points

Though not reflected in most hazard and risk assessments, the gender division of labor shapes the exposure of women & men to different hazards, taking different shape in different cultural contexts.

- ◆ Women's more extensive domestic labor exposes them more to hazards of interior space, e.g. smoke pollution from cooking fires, post-flood mold, erratic electrification & contaminated water. Women farmers and others who rely on natural resources such as wood and water for their livelihood are threatened by drought, deforestation, pollution, and other hazards of environmental degradation and climate change.
- ◆ Many women are doubly exposed to toxics and contaminated air & water, through domestic labor in interior spaces & in such outdoor work as construction and mining.
- ◆ Male-dominated work sites often expose men to air pollutants & extremes of heat & cold weather, as well as technological hazards such as radiation. "First responder" professions dominated by men threaten their health in hazardous materials spills or dangerous rescue roles. Leisure activities put women & men differently at risk, too, e.g. men's higher risk of lightning strike in such outdoor sports as golf.

Living conditions and inequalities also increase women's exposure and susceptibility to hazards of many kinds.

- ◆ Women's lower economic status makes it more difficult for them to purchase equipment or supplies useful for mitigation, for example the medications needed by their children in a health epidemic or the air conditioners that save lives in extreme heat.
- ◆ Women who lack safe and accessible transport and those who live with chronic illness, age-related diseases or physical/mental disabilities are less able to avoid or escape hazards due to decreased mobility. Women's mobility is also constrained by religious norms and fear of violence which increases their exposure to life-threatening hazards such as flooding. Women responsible for the young, old, ill and those with disabilities are similarly limited.
- ◆ Women's generally increased longevity means women more than men must cope as elders with the challenges of technological and/or induced hazards.
- ◆ Poor health and nutritional status undermine the ability of poor women around the world to resist the effects of natural, technological or deliberately induced hazards.
- ◆ Pregnancy as well as pre- and post-natal health conditions diminish women's resistance, for example to the effects of contaminants in agricultural and/or industrial production, food contaminants, toxic gas or radiation. Men's reproductive health is also affected by these hazards.

Women's intentions to mitigate known hazards are frequently undermined by structural and interpersonal barriers.

- ◆ Studies demonstrate women's higher levels of awareness about everyday hazards which often motivates social action. Local women lead neighborhood campaigns for safer water, air, transport and food, in rich and poor countries alike. Some research finds them more supportive of government action to mitigate hazards and adapt to climate changes.
- ◆ Without strong decision-making power in the household or in government, women's desires for mitigation and the skills they would bring to this are often not recognized, supported, or utilized.
- ◆ Domestic responsibilities restrict women more than men from full and equal participation in community mitigation efforts, unless compensatory actions are taken.
- ◆ Mitigation research is dominated by structural, large-scale, public & "high tech" mitigation strategies to the neglect of nonstructural mitigation in and around the household.
- ◆ Women in the global South and North are under-represented among economic and political elites whose decisions affect hazardous working or living conditions, for example related to energy use, transport systems, fire protection, urban wastewater systems, or early warning systems for extreme weather.

Opportunities for Action



Credit: GROOTS, Guatemala

“ I thought that mapping was a very technical process. But I see now that when communities do their own mapping, it is different,” Ruth Serech an indigenous leader of a national rural women’s organization from Guatemala. Another leader said “People often talk about community mapping but no one shows communities how they can do it for themselves. Sometimes people come here and ask questions and take our knowledge to use in other places.” Community Hazard Mapping Learning Exchange on Resilience, Honduras, July 18, 2008 organized by Grassroots Sisters Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) through the Community Disaster Resilience Fund Program. International peer learning exchanges among grassroots women’s organizations is the hallmark of GROOTS work.

In Nicaragua, The Union of Cooperatives of Las Brumas followed women’s risk mapping workshops with negotiations leading to an earmark of 4% of the local government budget for women’s disaster reduction campaigns.



Credit: SSP, India

8 women’s organizations , 88 villages , 8 Indian states

This level of sustained commitment to community-driven, women led resilience building will fundamentally alter the risk environment in which women and girls, boys and men live and work. The Community Disaster Resilience Fund supports demonstration projects such as this to enable specific mitigation and preparedness initiatives undertaken by grassroots women.

Sisters On The Planet

“Is this the legacy we will leave the children of the world?” “ The first thing that struck me was how dry it had become here. Flood plains on the family farm just don’t flood anymore. It’s still green, but ten years ago it was gumboots and 4WD territory. As kids, we used to watch brogga dance on a nearby swamp. But it’s not a swamp anymore. Every time I get in my car, the impact is probably being felt by someone in Bangladesh. There’s no way of separating climate change from any part of your life.”

Helen Henry raises awareness on the impacts of climate change in her community and lobbies local leaders to reduce the carbon footprint of her hometown of Hamilton, South Australia. Source: Sisters on the Planet project, Oxfam Australia:

<http://www.oxfam.org.nz/index.asp?s1=what%20we%20do&s2=issues+we+work+on&s3=climate+change&s4=take+action&s5=sisters+on+t>

Manila Declaration for Global Action: Gender, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction

Women and men must equally participate in climate change, disaster risk reduction decision-making processes at community, national, regional and international levels. . . Financial institutions and funding mechanisms supporting climate change measures and disaster risk reduction should:

- Integrate gender-sensitive criteria into planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs, projects and initiatives
- Allocate adequate resources to address the needs of women in climate change mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction, for example through funding appropriate and environmentally sound technologies and supporting women’s grassroots initiatives in sustainable use of natural resources
- Refrain from funding extractive industries, such as mining, logging and oil and natural gas extractions that exacerbate climate change, poverty and gender inequality

Excerpted from the Manila Declaration for Global Action on Gender, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction , 22 October 2008: http://www.unifem.org/attachments/stories/200810_ManilaDeclarationOnGenderAndClimateChange_eng.pdf

Research Questions

What conditions facilitate and/or undermine women's mitigation efforts? What hazards most endanger different women/men in different regions and contexts and how are these specifically addressed in national hazard mitigation campaigns? How are women's mitigation practices shared within & between regions & across hazards? What have women/men in different social locations learned about the sex & gender dimensions of multiple hazards in diverse contexts? How is this knowledge shared? Under what conditions do women's & community groups integrate hazard mitigation into their on-going activities? How effectively have governmental & external agencies scaled up successful gender-inclusive mitigation strategies? What does local knowledge contribute to gender-sensitive hazard, vulnerability & capacity mapping? What are the carbon footprints of women & men, respectively, and what are the implications for gender-focused adaptation & mitigation? What trends & patterns exist that differentially affect the capacities of women & men to cope with emergent, interacting & diverse hazards?

Policy Guidelines

Household mitigation strategies should be highlighted & supported. Educational & awareness resources should target & engage women who can model effective 'low tech' mitigation. National/local mitigation policy should reflect knowledge of empirical studies on this topic. Action research projects are needed to demonstrate, evaluate, improve upon & scale up effective gender-aware mitigation models related to natural, technological & induced hazards. Capacity should be developed in women's & community groups to enable meaningful participation in risk assessments and local mitigation projects. Women's networks, organizations & groups at all levels should be included as decision-making stakeholders & potential partners in all mitigation & risk reduction initiatives. Sound mitigation principles must be integrated into recovery planning with attention to the current & potential contributions of women & men equally.

Practical Steps

Gender-awareness programs should be implemented or strengthened to increase gender expertise among mitigation specialists. Training & scenario-based exercises should be planned in conjunction with women's grassroots networks & include them as active participants. Participatory GIS mapping should include diverse groups of women as equal participants. Sex- and age-disaggregated data should be collected, developed, evaluated & utilized when hazards & the capacity for hazard mitigation are assessed. Practical mitigation guides geared to families & community groups should be gender-aware in text, tone, substance & distribution. Hazard identification guides should target women/men specifically to increase awareness of gender- and sex-specific effects. The expertise of local women & scientists/technicians should be sought & utilized in mitigation work.

Selected Resources

- ISDR Good Practice document on gender and climate change adaptation: http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about_isdr/isdr-publications/17-Gender_Perspectives_Integrating_DRR_CC/Gender_Perspectives_Integrating_DRR_CC_Good%20Practices.pdf
- ISDR Good Practice document on gender and disaster risk reduction: http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about_isdr/isdr-publications/09-gender-good-practices/gender-good-practices.pdf ▪ M. Chowdhury, Women's Technological Innovations and Adaptations for Disaster Mitigation: A Case Study of Charlands in Bangladesh and other papers from the UN Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting, Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: a Gender Perspective, 2001: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/env_manage/documents.html ▪ Working With Women at Risk: Practical Guidelines for Assessing Local Risk: http://gdnonline.org/resources/Working_women_English.pdf ▪ Gender and Climate Change: Mapping the Linkages, Alyson Brody, Justina Demetriades and Emily Esplen for Bridge/IDS: http://www.ceipaz.org/images/contenido/BRIDGE_GenderClimateChangeConflict_Global.pdf ▪ Climate Changes and Climate Justice, Gender and Development 17 (1), 2009: <http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/current.asp>

Websites to watch: GenaNet: <http://www.genanet.de/index.php?id=2&L=1> ▪ WEDO/Global Gender & Climate Alliance: <http://www.wedo.org/learn/library/media-type/pdf/global-gender-climate-alliance-gcca> ▪ Gender and Water Alliance: <http://www.genderandwater.org/page/121> ▪ All-India Disaster Mitigation Institute: <http://www.aidmi.org/whats-new.asp> ▪ Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP): http://www.sspindia.org/Disaster_Watch: <http://www.disasterwatch.net/index.html>

And visit the website of the Gender and Disaster Network for additional references, accounts from the field, policy & practice guides, examples of good practice, and core concepts for gendering disaster risk reduction: www.gdnonline.org