Women and Disaster: What’s the connection?

Do disasters affect women and men equally? How does being a woman matter in a disaster?

Everyone is exposed to danger in life—but not everyone is equally exposed to the effects of hazardous conditions in their daily lives. Some people are very hard-hit in disasters and others pick up the pieces and go on. Why is this?

Don’t most women and men face the risks and challenges of life together?

Yes and no. People living on land prone to flooding or subject to severe droughts share many of the same worries about how to make a living and raise their families in risky environments.

But think of the everyday lives of women and men you know. How do they spend their days—and where? What skills do they have? What resources do they control? Who makes important decisions in their homes and neighborhoods? What do they do when they need help?

These are differences that affect how people prepare for, survive, cope with, and recover from extreme events like landslides or earthquakes and from “man made” disasters like toxic spills, explosions, and war, too.

Many women and girls are at increased risk

Disasters can hit girls and women hard. Sometimes they are less likely than men in their neighborhood to live through an earthquake or eruption because they put others first and aren’t always free to act in their own best interests. Often, women lack the information or spare time or extra income it takes to prepare their homes and workplaces for extreme events like cyclones. And afterwards, most women around the world have less money, land, political influence and other
resources to help them fully recover from their losses.

Not all women are more vulnerable than the men around them to disasters but, in every culture and society, a great many girls and women are at high risk. Why is this?

- Part of the answer is physical. Women may be less mobile than many men before and after childbirth and are more likely to have health problems related to old age than men, who tend not to live as long.

- Part of the answer is economic. Women are the poorest of the poor. In many parts of the world, they rely on the local water, animals, and land for their income so natural disasters hit them hard.

- Part of the answer is social. Women provide food, water, fuel wood and other necessities of life for others. Generally, they are also the ones who care for infants and children, older people, and others in their community and household who live with disabilities or illness.

    Also, more women than men live alone. Widows, women heading households alone, and women who have left their homes and moved their families to the city or even another country are especially likely not to have secure incomes, savings, or credit. They may be newcomers without many friendships or isolated from others because of the language they speak.

- And part of the answer is political. Many women are made homeless by male violence, long before an earthquake or volcanic eruption. Generally, men make the key decisions about disasters—how and when to prepare, evacuate, rebuild, or relocate.

    Women do not enjoy their full human rights in most societies and cultures today, and this too makes it more difficult for them to cope with the effects of disasters.

So vulnerability to disasters varies between women and men, just as it does between the old and young, rich and poor, urban and rural.

**But women are also survivors who help make communities safer.**

In a disaster, people are safer—less vulnerable—when they know what hazards they face and have the resources they need to prepare for emergencies and cope with the challenges of rebuilding. Women may be hit hard by contaminated water,
violence, or a devastating fire or landslide, but they are not simply victims. Their everyday routines and skills give women strength in a crisis.

- Women often know more than men about how people in their community live—for example, those who are sick or disabled and may need help leaving their home in a cyclone, and those who can readily help. The newcomer in the neighborhood and people like prostitutes or widows who may be 'outsiders' to some, are often known to women in the neighborhood.

- Women also tend to listen to warnings about danger and pay attention to hazards like flood-prone rivers that children must cross to reach their school. When asked to evacuate, many times women leave more readily than men.

- Because women so often use the land, water and animals to earn a living and feed their families, they try to conserve these resources for future use. To the best of their ability, they help keep water clean, soil fertile, forests sustainable, and livestock healthy—helping land, livestock, and people in a bad storm or earthquake.

- Older women especially will remember how people coped with past hazards and disasters and are more likely than men to still speak the native language. They can help others like them learn how to minimize risk and be safer in a disaster.

- Women are more likely than men to share information, ideas, and resources because they are more organized at the grassroots. They build lively networks of friends at work, in schools, in their neighborhood and through their religion. Often in a disaster, it is women's groups that take the lead in helping rebuild community solidarity after a disaster.

- Like men, women in a crisis do what needs to be done. They don't sit and wait for rescue but help themselves and their neighbors when they can. When the crisis passes, it is women especially—as nurses, teachers, counselors, and caregivers—who help disaster survivors deal with the painful losses of disasters.

- In rising numbers, women are also employed as environmental scientists and policy makers, firefighters and police officers, health care providers and teachers. They have important roles in planning agencies, humanitarian relief operations, and emergency management organizations worldwide.
Long before any disaster, women in your area probably came together to provide for their families and organize stronger communities. They may be harvesting rainwater or experimenting with drought-resistant crops or ways to build sturdy houses, monitoring river levels, forming neighborhood self-help groups, working together to build a child care center or local clinics, and educating their children about self-protection.

When women plant backyard gardens, join community disaster preparedness groups, monitor environmental changes and pay attention to disaster warning systems, they are helping to prevent a natural event like a forest fire or fierce storm from becoming a “natural” disaster.

**What can you do?**

Women’s lives are very different. But, around the world, many women’s groups and individual women are taking steps to reduce the risk of disasters.

- Identify hazards and dangers affecting people in your own neighborhood.

- Identify your resources, skills, and capacities in dealing with hazards and potential disasters.

- Identify changes needed to make women like you less vulnerable to these hazards.

- Identify how groups and networks you know can help organize the community to reduce dangerous conditions and prepare to respond to disasters when they do occur.

- Identify ways women and men can work together to help minimize hazards and reduce the risk of disasters.

Working together, women and women’s community organizations and networks have a vital role to play in building safer communities. It starts with you!

For more information about disasters and emergency preparedness, contact your emergency management authorities.

For more information about working with other women to reduce the threat of disasters, see Working With Women At Risk: Practical Guidelines for Assessing Disaster.
Vulnerabilities and Capacities at the Local Level.

Write for a copy from the International Hurricane Center, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, 33199.

Or you can find it on the internet: www.gdnonline.org/resources/womena nddisasterbrochure.pdf