

Developing community resilience: women as part of the solution

“Perception is perhaps the most important issue. If women are good at managing contingencies at home, why do we feel they cannot play a serious role in the contingency planning process at the district, block or state level?”

(Schwoebel and Menon 2004:6)

Shifting from vulnerabilities to capacities

Gender is a factor in determining men’s and women’s vulnerabilities in the face of disaster. However, as the previous section has shown, gender divisions of labour, household and economic structures, maternal health, and other aspects of gendered inequality that shape people’s everyday lives put women and girls at particular risk (Enarson 2002b). While a gender perspective provides crucial insights into why women face heightened vulnerability in disaster, to see them solely as victims does them a serious injustice and deprives the field of a potentially powerful fount of knowledge for strengthening hazard reduction and disaster management.

There is considerable evidence from the field that points to the myriad ways in which even the poorest of women living in the starkest of conditions are equipped with knowledge, skills, and coping strategies that are valuable reservoirs of ‘capital’ to draw upon at critical points in the disaster cycle. Strategies that develop and strengthen women’s



capacity in hazard reduction and disaster response acknowledge that they, along with men, are key social actors in developing more hazard-resilient communities.

The challenge is how to balance gender vulnerabilities with capacities, and not to lose sight of one in focusing on the other. The disaster preparedness and management (DP/M) community is becoming increasingly aware that “mitigation is not a technical accomplishment but a social process” (Fordham n.d.) which must draw on the strengths and knowledge systems of the people, women and men, whose lives are most likely to be affected by disasters. There is, moreover, recognition that gender equity is a necessary ingredient for bolstering households with the capacity to engage in hazard/risk reduction activities, thus focusing attention on the ways in which women are ‘keys to (hazard) prevention’ because of their everyday experiences (Enarson 2001a; UN 2004). Some of the skills women have that can make them ‘keys to hazard prevention’ are listed below.

- They manage and use natural resources on a daily basis.
- They can draw on survival and coping skills in emergencies, including food preservation.
- They have family and community roles that make them important ‘risk’ communicators.
- Their social networks provide them with information about members of the community who may be in need of assistance, or who can help in times of crisis.
- They are often more likely than men to be attentive to emergency warnings and the need for disaster preparedness.
- They are safety conscious and ‘risk averse’
- They having informal physical and mental health care skills and experience.



- They play leadership roles in local networks and organisations.
- They have formal and informal occupational specialisation in jobs vital to disaster preparedness and recovery (e.g., teaching, counselling, health care, etc).

Contributing to community-level resilience

Thus far, the disaster community has failed to understand how people survive disasters, emphasising identification, mapping, and recording of vulnerability indicators and risk factors to the exclusion of analysing the strengths, skills, and resources that local communities draw on to build their resilience.

Assessing vulnerabilities and resilience through a gendered lens is a valuable fount of knowledge for community-based vulnerability research. Examples from around the world illustrate how, in conjunction with civil society organisations, as members of formal groups and informally, local communities generally and women, in particular, are often at the forefront in mobilising efforts for disaster preparedness, relief, and rehabilitation (Abrahamovitz 2001; Enarson 2001a; 2001b; 2002b; SEEDS 2005; Twigg 2004). Lessons from the field point to the ways in which mobilising, giving adequate training to, and financing local women's groups can be a powerful way of helping disaster-prone and affected communities deal with their practical and strategic needs (SEEDS 2005).

- They have access to information that is often not easily accessible to outsiders.
- They can mobilise resources and build up networks.
- They can play a valuable role in monitoring programmes.
- They can contribute to empowering individuals and households.

These lessons, some of which are documented below, provide an important counterbalance to the 'victim paradigm' that all too often pervades presentations of disasters and which views those caught up in them as having little control over their fates or lives and few capabilities (Enarson 2001b). More importantly, the evidence suggests that women's involvement in DP/M work can provide them with new skills and confidence which, together, can lay the groundwork for strengthening their and their households' abilities to be more resilient to the risks of natural hazards (PAHO n.d.; UNICEF 2006).

Women's local efforts to reduce and manage risk include the following.

- **Risk assessment:** Women's community-based organisations in St. Lucia and the Dominican Republic have participated in a risk mapping exercise in their communities. They later compiled community vulnerability profiles that were shared with community leaders and local emergency managers. This module has subsequently been tested in El Salvador and Dominica (Enarson 2002b).
- **Environmental hazard mitigation:** Poor rural women living in the *charlands* (sandbars created by erosion and accretion in rivers prone to flooding and sand carpeting that render large tracts of cultivable lands non-arable and destroy standing crops) of Bangladesh have developed a number of technological innovations to reduce risk in the ecologically fragile areas: increasing food security through

kitchen gardening, use of fast-growing seedlings, food processing and storage, seed preservation, composting, and rainwater harvesting. They prepare for the floods by gathering sufficient fodder for livestock and planting trees around homesteads and, because the frequency of storms and river erosion forces families to move frequently, prefer to use non-durable materials such as grasses to construct their homes. They ensure access to potable water by digging holes in moist sandy spots near the river: the water is filtered through the sand particles and settles to the bottom of the pit, after which it is scooped out with coconut shells and stored in a clean pan (Chowdhury 2001).

- **Post-disaster recovery (a):** During and after the 2001 earthquake in the Kutch region of Gujarat (India), grassroots women's organisations working with community-based groups, mitigation agencies, and government recovery programmes played a leading role in providing rural women with income-generating work and training in earthquake-resistant masonry techniques (Enarson 2001a).
- **Post-disaster recovery (b):** After the 1993 earthquake in Latur, Maharashtra (India), women's groups and rural organisations developed a system of 'community consultants' to serve as an interface between the communities affected and the government for long-term development. Local women were trained in earthquake-resilient methods of construction, were involved in monitoring the housing reconstruction process, and were consulted about dwelling designs suitable for women. Subsequently, this body of experience and knowledge was shared with women's groups in Turkey after the 1999 earthquake (SEEDS 2005).

Natural disasters as opportunities for social change

Lessons learned from natural disasters that have occurred suggest that a foregrounding of gender concerns in disaster management should begin by drawing upon the connections between women's social and economic needs and priorities, addressing the root causes of their low status as well as being attentive to longer-term sustainable development concerns. The examples provided below also highlight the creative ways in which gender mainstreaming can address the challenges of working in sociocultural conditions where sex segregation is part of the fabric of everyday interactions and is often the reason for the disproportionate impact of disasters on women in South Asia.

Gender mainstreaming disaster preparedness and relief work in Bangladesh

Since the devastating floods of 1991 when disproportionate numbers of women lost their lives, a concerted effort has been made to recruit female volunteers and female field workers into disaster preparedness and relief work. One such initiative, under the aegis of the Bangladesh Red Crescent and German Red Cross, has been to set up village DP committees and to provide training to women on what to take to shelters and how to save food, increase awareness amongst women and men about the importance of gender equality, and provide women with an opportunity to exchange ideas with other women. Another, run jointly by the Cyclone Preparedness Programme of Bangladesh and Red Crescent Society, now recruits female volunteers and female field workers for

local disaster response, and encourages male and female micro-groups to get involved in decision making on disaster issues. Their involvement has been encouraged by supporting them through education, training in reproductive health, organising self-help groups and small-scale businesses. One outcome has been women's increased confidence in their ability to participate in community life (Twigg 2004).

Helping to address the root causes of women's vulnerabilities in Pakistan

Following the severe floods of 1992, a non-government organisation, Pattan, developed new institutional structures to facilitate reduction in community vulnerability to floods; and special emphasis was placed on developing women's capacities. Features of the group's work included employing female relief workers, introducing the concept of co-ownership of houses by both husband and wife, registering women as heads of households to receive food for their families, and involving women in designing and constructing houses. While the concept of joint house ownership took some time to be accepted, over time it has contributed to a reduction in domestic violence and has given women a greater sense of self-confidence which has been translated into their involvement in other collective projects (Twigg 2004).

Developing self-confidence through involvement in disaster mitigation in Nepal

In Nepal, as a result of a disaster-mitigation project funded by UNDP, women are now beginning to participate with men in decision-making relating to the project, a level of cooperation which is now spilling over into domestic and social matters. In one village women formed groups and began tackling pressing social issues such as male alcoholism and are feeling more confident in their ability to mobilise themselves around development concerns. Perceptions of risk have also undergone change as a result of disaster mitigation training (Thapa 2001).

Integrating recovery work with economic self-sufficiency and long-term sustainable development in India

When water conservation became a critical issue during and after the 2001 earthquake in the Kutch region of Gujarat (India), the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) together with the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) worked with local women to teach them new techniques of water harvesting with household containers and in community ponds and wells. Responding to the needs of women artisans who, already weakened by on-going drought, had asked not for emergency relief goods but for supplies that would enable them to begin sewing and earning again, SEWA and other local women's organisations provided craft kits that enabled women still living in tents to earn the income essential for getting their lives back on track. SEWA's approach combined livelihood reconstruction with other aspects of social support, such as child-care centres, social/economic insurance, and providing arenas for women to engage in social dialogue. Later, SEWA and DMI trained women in seismic-resistant building techniques and began to rebuild markets for women artisans. The success of these initiatives is attributed to both DMI's and SEWA's long track records of working amongst local

communities and their extensive and well-developed social networks and knowledge of the people and their needs (Enarson et al. 2002b).

In destroying the fabric of everyday life and creating conditions in which women are compelled to play a more active part in economic and public life, disasters also open up spaces within which social change can occur. It remains to be seen whether changes in gender and economics persist over the long term. Although the literature on disasters records that there is often a tendency in the immediacy of the event for women and men to cooperate more in daily activities, and for men to give greater respect to their wives for their involvement in activities hitherto considered 'masculine,' most of the literature also records the diminishment over time of these aspects (Bradshaw 2004b; Delaney and Shrader 2000; United Nations 2004). What these examples suggest is that there is a post-disaster 'window of opportunity' which can provide a valuable space within which the disaster preparedness and management community, along with other agencies, could begin to lay the groundwork for social change that promotes gender equality and is firmly rooted in sustainable development and hazard prevention (Enarson 2001b; 2002b).

It takes time to build capacities. The lessons learned from the literature suggest that people's ability to cope with crises and to recover from them is multi-faceted and includes material, physical and social resources, beliefs, and attitudes (Graham 2001). While there are no quick fixes, there is nevertheless abundant evidence that collective mobilisation and economic security play a powerful role in developing women's sense of self-esteem, socially empowering them, and, as a result, enlarging their sense of the possible. This should not be underestimated.

From knowledge to action: some gender guidelines

Gender analysis in DP/M

There are already many excellent gender guidelines available in the field of disaster preparedness and management (ActionAid International 2005; FAO n.d. ; Graham 2001; Schwoebel and Menon 2004; Twigg 2004; Enarson 2005; WHO 2005). This section presents a synthesis of some of this material.

Gender analysis is a useful tool for analysing how a community works by exploring the experiences of different categories of people within it. Specifically, it identifies the varied roles that structure women's and men's relationships and activities in their everyday lives; the unequal power relationship that often characterises their social, economic, and political engagements; and the consequences such inequalities may have over their health and life opportunities. It does this by framing questions pertinent to who does *what*, *when*, and *why*; who has access to *what* and *who doesn't*; and who has control over *what* and *who doesn't*. Together with these insights into roles, responsibilities, and rights of access and control, it also highlights how culturally-structured understandings of what it means to be a woman or a man in a particular