Gender Equality & Disaster Risk Reduction
Building Capacity in Women’s and Community Groups

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Introduction

No country in the world is entirely safe but lack of capacity to control hazards is a significant burden for developing countries. An estimated 97 percent of deaths related to natural disasters occur in developing countries. The disasters threaten people’s lives, damage crops and infrastructure, interrupt social services and cause economic damages. Consequently, disasters have deprived millions of people food water and shelter.

Over 70% per cent of the world’s disasters are caused by weather and climatic factors. In Kenya, disasters occur mainly from floods and drought. These two accounts for 70% of the disasters communities have to cope with, particularly in rural areas. By the very nature of women’s roles, they suffer the impact more than does their male counterparts.

The Beijing and Beijing + 5 conferences addressed the risks faced by women in disasters as a result of natural hazards such as floods and drought. The roles women play to mitigate disaster risks were too addressed. Such recognition was viewed by the world governments during the Beijing + 5 was an important move towards mainstreaming gender concerns in management of disasters.

During the Soroptimist Governors’ meeting held in Nairobi in May 2003, the UN/ISDR was invited to present a paper on their work in Africa with a view of forging a partnership to address gender concerns on the international perspectives on disaster management. This was followed with a joint two day workshop organized between Soroptimist International, Club of Nairobi and UN/ISDR in collaboration with Drought Monitoring Center to mobilize women to actively participate in disaster risk management and to share and address gender concerns. The workshop provided a forum for women to discuss how disasters affected women and men differently and what kind of roles women play in disaster risk management. This did not only pave the way for enhancement of UN/ISDR-AFRICA collaboration and networking, but also to mark the launching of a series of events that ISDR Africa was undertaking to address gender integration and promote women’s role in early warning, prevention and management of natural disasters.
When too much water hurts.... as much as lack of it

The increasing extent of disastrous flooding can be explained by various factors including growing urban populations, denser occupancy of flood plains, as well as expanded land use. Often, direct deaths result from the floods. The floods also destroy property increasing poverty. Since women constitute the world’s poorer gender, destruction of their property, the arising disputes, loss of relatives resulting from floods complicates their situation. Most of the rural communities depend on wood and kerosene as their main source of energy. Firewood collection is done mainly by women and this becomes a nightmare as during floods.

Drought brings with it certain hardships, the brunt of which women suffer more. When there is drought, crop production fails and famine sets in. Long spells of dry weather conditions are marked with widespread of food insecurity. Lack of food complicates women’s roles as food providers, particularly in rural areas. Amongst the nomadic communities of Africa, men wonder with their flocks away from home in search of pasture and water. The women remain at home with the children under very precarious conditions, which predispose them to theft and sexual attacks spreading risk of getting HIV/AIDS. When conflicts breakout over control of meager and fast diminishing grazing land, Women bear the brunt of incessant conflicts and are often uprooted from environments they have learnt to cope with.

**Feminization of Poverty**

Poverty is perhaps the most pervasive hazard in the African region. Poverty, as has been well documented, has a particularly grave impact on women. The feminization of poverty has been highlighted as a key factor in the vulnerability of women, not only in terms of disasters, but in terms of equality and development in the region. Poverty leads women to live in higher risk environments, heightening their vulnerability to the impacts of disaster.
Extreme poverty impedes overall development. This impacts all other aspects of life and exacerbates other hazards such as epidemics, floods and drought. The levels of poverty in the African region are the highest in the world, and the growth levels remain low, implying that issues of poverty will continue to increase the vulnerability of the region in the near future. In the 2003 Human Development Report, Sub Saharan Africa was reported to have made negative progress towards the Millennium Development Goal of poverty reduction. Poverty however, must be viewed in a broader framework of inequality in society, and the connections between economic poverty and income inequality. There are clear linkages between property rights and wife inheritance, which again exacerbates women’s vulnerability and increased the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

**Health Issues & HIV/AIDS**

Health issues in Africa contribute a great deal to the levels of vulnerability of people, particularly the poor. The impact of HIV AIDS on communities in Africa lessens coping capacities. In many countries in Africa, HIV AIDS has been declared a national disaster, and disaster management strategies are being employed to address the epidemic.

**Why are women most Vulnerable? The Gender Dimensions**

In Africa, disasters have had a disproportionately negative impact on women than on men. This emanates from the gender imposed roles and relationships that perpetuate both women’s vulnerability and capacity to respond to disasters when they occur. Several factors can be mentioned here;

*Domestic roles*

Women are most of the time engaged in domestic chores like caring for family, collecting water and firewood. This leaves them with little energy to focus on issues of disaster prevention and management. For instance during drought, women trek long distances into the forest in search of wood fuel, water and food. As they do this, they are exposed to adverse weather and climatic conditions and possibility of sexual abuses. Similarly, as they farm or search for fuel, they
destroy natural forests and waterbeds. Yet in most African cultures, women are prohibited from planting trees. But when here is deforestation, they are the first to suffer because they lack firewood to cook, their springs dry, and they have no water to drink.

As farmers, women spend most of the time in households and on food production, while men engage in cash crop farming. The benefit each of them derives from their pre-occupation equips them differently to face severe food shortages and famines that often accompany dry spells in Africa.

Ownership and Access to Property and Resources
In most African communities, women are not traditionally allowed to own property, hence the lack the resources to cushion them in times of disaster. Neither can they take part in preventive initiatives. The rural communities have all along relied on traditional early warning signs, some of which are not dependable. Often, they lack information which may enable them monitor climate and avoid disaster.

In most of African continent, death, divorce or migration to cities for employment often push women to head households. A disparity in access to resources also gives a gender dimension to disaster management. Such resources include information, health services, legal services and legal protection. During disasters, it is children and the elderly who often are unable to access support.

Access to Land
Women are traditionally not allowed to own land. When boundaries are washed away or when people return to their plots after migration from disasters, women are normally ill placed to handle the disputes that arise. Land boards normally demand a fee before they can listen to disputes. Such grievances also hold ground if the complainant has a title deed, which women do not normally possess. Because of traditional stereotypes, women presenting themselves before land boards have to carry male relatives to be sure they will be listened to.

Policy and Leadership
Policy provides clear frameworks for action and sets priorities for governments and other actors in the disaster management process. This is especially important from a gender perspective, as the different needs of men and women are often overlooked in an ad hoc manner in managing and responding to disasters. By integrating gender into a larger framework, their importance, and the priorities of men and women are better addressed.

Since few women serve in policy organs, they can hardly influence crucial decisions that affect them. The lack of policy frameworks have left populations living in disaster prone regions to evolve their own survival strategies. In some cases, these coping strategies serve to increase the burden of women; in other cases they can play an empowering role. Through gender sensitive disaster management policy, these burdens can be lessened and opportunities for empowerment supported. It is now a challenge for policy makers to support these survival mechanisms with sound disaster management policies.

What has been done before?
Policy has an enormously important role to play in breaking the cycle of risk and vulnerability that continues to hamper human development in Africa. In Africa, the development of policy to guide frameworks for sustainable management of disasters is beginning, though it has been slow to take hold in many countries. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an important legal framework for the protection of the rights of women, and the promotion of gender equality in policy. 174 states worldwide have become parties to CEDAW. Only three African countries have not become parties to the Convention - Swaziland, Sudan and Somalia. Thus, reporting and monitoring mechanisms exist with all other countries in the region to ensure that policies developed by the government do so in line with the framework of CEDAW.

This framework is an important tool for the development of gender sensitive disaster management policies in Africa. However, there is need to monitor progress on the countries implementing the CEDAW recommendations. Establishment of sound communication mechanisms within the civil society also
provides important means for the development of policies on disaster management.

The exercise of mainstreaming gender in the Conflict Early Warning Response (CEWARN) system by IGAD can have a supportive and catalytic impact on gender mainstreaming in disaster management policy among IGAD countries. The draft disaster management policy in Kenya cites the CEWARN, and will continue to collaborate with and support the network. The SADC strategy on gender mainstreaming also provides a positive foundation for gendered disaster management at the national level.

**The capacity building gap**

For women to cope with disaster management, they need to understand the causes of the disasters they encounter and have skills to cope with those disasters. Unfortunately, this is never the case. Right from the onset, women do not have proper access to education, which can impact the required skills and put them in positions of leadership. The inability of institutions to address disaster risk will impacts on women differently. In many ways, the lack of institutional capacity shuts women out of the decision making process, and fails to respond to the needs of both men and women.

Though the role of women in disaster management is largely ignored, they are the ones who hold the key to disaster management. They are the main force for community development and household welfares. They are the ones who can take a lead in environmental conservation initiatives. In my country Kenya, there both formal and informal Community Based Organizations (CBOs) involved in many activities of income generation that contribute to welfare development and yet their effort is not appreciated at the national level. Women have only been recognized when it comes to giving their votes for men to take up political leadership.

It is therefore particularly important that disaster management policies in the region are developed to enhance the coping capacities of communities who deal with these disasters on a recurrent basis.
CASE STUDY 1: Involving women in disaster management

Flooding in Kenya is a cyclical occurrence; however it remains a major threat to populations living in flood prone regions in Kenya's Western Province. The 2003 floods provide an example of disaster management and response in policy and practice in the African context. In Western Kenya the major rivers that pour into Lake Victoria that result in floods include Nzoia, Nyando, and Kuja. The water from these rivers destroy human settlements, property, roads, schools, hospitals, markets centres, soils, agricultural lands and fish-breeding sites, and more importantly barriers such as dykes. The flood water also wash away waste disposal facilities like pit latrines. Flood does cause diseases such as dysentery, cholera, malaria, typhoid pneumonia and asthma. All these affect women, children, the aged and physically disabled more than they do affect men.

The floods affected three areas namely Shibale, Matungu and Budalangi. Men and women went through different experiences in the course of this disaster. The floods were exacerbated by deforestation in higher areas, leading to more rapid movement of rainwater on to these low lying areas. It is estimated that the floods affected 24,000-53,000 people. Nearly 11,000 people were displaced into camps. But men, who are mostly fishermen, were able to continue their trade. The fish was, however, insufficient to fully support households in the absence of farming. Relief supplies delivered to camps were never adequate. For example, while women were given rations, they were forced to sell some of the rations in order to pay for the maize to be ground.

Despite their involvement, however, issues of their basic needs such as distribution of their sanitary towels were not addressed. The community was involved in managing the disaster through community committees. Women, together with village elders, were involved in co-ordination and decision-making. They took positions of responsibility as assistant chairpersons, health and sanitation coordinator and security coordination. Women took their concerns to a male member of the committee, as they wielded greater influence and were therefore more likely to be of assistance. Shibale has particularly a high number of widow headed households, primarily HIV AIDS widows. They formed an association to enable them access aid and relief supplies. However, one of the main challenges they faced was knowing who to go to, and ensuring that their needs were considered and action taken.

The Challenges..

Relief food was distributed on the basis of household sizes. This led to a rise in early marriages in attempts to increase household sizes so that families could gain a greater share of relief distribution. Congestion in camps also strained domestic relations for women particularly here they had big children in households. Often, they had to seek alternative accommodation. Prostitution in nearby towns came in as an easy option. With this came the prevalence of HIV Aids. In one case, a woman who had been widowed from HIV in Shibale had double tragedy when before death, her husband sold off all land to because she had not born him any sons. This is, however, a remarkable example of formal involvement of women and it enabled more gender balanced decision making. Economic insecurity is clearly an issue that constrains the ability of women to prevent and mitigate the impacts of floods on their lives. Women in Shibale are willing to move a little further from the river but they do not have the means. Lack of resources also lead to children's loss of education and marginalization of women. With communities staying in camps, schools were far and this has had an impact on enrollment. Poor conditions in camps also led to poor performance.
Crucial partnerships the Way forward

Mumias Sugar Company is a positive example of means through which disaster management, gender and the private sector can be linked in disaster management. The company has a tree seedling planting programme to prevent flooding. Though they are targeting men, they are considering including women as well. The Soroptimist Club of Mumias is working towards linking women groups with the Mumias Sugar Company for support in income-generation and environmental sanitation activities. This however must be undertaken with a great deal of cultural sensitivity, as the planting of trees is traditionally a male activity in Western Region of Kenya.

Women at the grassroot level would wish to improve their capacity to cope with disaster; both women and men had some clear useful ideas. This underlines the need for policy to ensure that both men and women are equally able to participate and articulate their needs and views before, during and after disaster.

Training and Capacity Building

Targeted training and capacity building of women at the local level will have a positive impact on the ability of women to play an equal role in disaster prevention, mitigation and management. This is an activity that civil society can effectively combine with advocacy for policy change to include gender considerations and ensure that women are well prepared to take on formal roles in disaster management structures.

WAY FORWARD:

It will be impossible for Africa to achieve sustainable progress in disaster risk management without addressing gender concerns and mobilizing African women to be involved in the development of the country’s policy position on Disaster Risk Management and Early Warning Systems. Both men and women must play a complimentary role in finding solutions to disaster management in Africa. Some key actions will be required from all stakeholders:

- To redress women’s situation, emphasis should focus on property rights, economic security and HIV AIDS.
- Incorporate existing Community Based Organizations (CBOs) as focal points to train women in disaster risk management.
Both men and women need to be trained on land rights. Initiatives should be taken to ensure that women have equal access to information on prevention and mitigation. If women’s domestic burdens are reduced, they will have the time to focus on issues that affect them, with a possibility of increasing their capacity to manage natural disasters.

- There is need to sensitize women on the national policy initiatives on disaster management. There is also need to strengthen women groups at the grassroots level as a way of boosting the confidence of women.

- There is need to empower women through demonstrations of simplified technologies that are appropriate and relevant to water harvesting and storage.

- Create Gender Focused Linkages on Disaster Management in the Region. Enable women get access to relevant information on disaster prevention and management for information is power.

- Support should be sought from international agencies to provide Direct Support on Gender Mainstreaming in Disaster Management Policy..

- Policies outlining the role of and participation of communities and civil society.

- Organizations in disaster management must include specific strategies targeting equal involvement of women

- Women’s capacity should be developed at all levels of decision-making. Active involvement on disaster management committees at national, district and local levels is particularly important.

Resource mobilization for women, training and capacity building at the local levels should target women. These actions will be necessary to build women’s capacity to cope with disaster.

- There is need for partnerships and collaboration in disaster management. The private sector should be involved in to support preventive measures and relief efforts during disaster. Women’s Networks at local and national levels should be supported.
There is need to link prevention and response initiatives. Capacity building programmes should create awareness on weather and climate change and early warning through workshops and seminars.

Civil society should be encouraged to take a role in assisting the development of disaster management policy by governments, and facilitating its effective implementation and dissemination.

Provide support to disaster affected areas that targets developmental issues will help to move communities away from relief reliance and towards prevention.

Disaster management policy should make provision for accessible legal services to protect women’s rights to property.

CONCLUSION

As already mentioned, the issue of women’s empowerment is at the centre of disaster management strategies for Africa. Such empowerment has to begin from childhood where the girl-child should be enabled to get the right education for economic security and placement in decision-making positions. Women should then be given access to information to stay prepared. There is then the issue of involvement in disaster management programmes so that their unique needs can be addressed.

It must however be emphasized that women can never go on this as a lone journey. They need the participation and facilitation of their male counterparts. They need collaboration, assistance from every hand that can help, from individuals, organizations, and governments. These activities can be realized within the context of a proper policy framework, which is the challenge of African governments.
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