a quarterly update from BRIDGE, raising gender awareness among policy-makers and practitioners

**Issue 4: Integrating gender into emergency responses**

*The 'tyranny of the urgent' in emergencies tends to override longer-term developmental concerns. In this issue, we ask how constraints to integrating gender in relief can be overcome and highlight the potential for tackling biases in the distribution of food aid and support for coping strategies. Rehabilitation offers an opportunity to redress inequalities between men and women, but is it that simple? Currents, our back page column, previews our forthcoming issue on gender and economic reform.*

**Overcoming the tyranny of the urgent**

With the persistence of humanitarian crises and particularly the rise of complex emergencies, established divisions between relief, rehabilitation and development work are being called into question (ACORD 1993). There is also growing attention to gender issues in emergency situations, which goes beyond the traditional concern with 'women and children' as passive victims, to a recognition of men's and women's different needs, interests, vulnerabilities, capacities and coping strategies (Byrne and Baden 1995).

Agencies at both the relief and development ends of the spectrum have introduced policies, guidelines and staff training packages to support the integration of gender concerns in emergency responses (e.g. UNHCR 1990, 1991; Oxfam 1993; Williams et al, 1994). However, the obstacles to realising this aim in practice should not be underestimated. The crisis of thousands of people on the move, in immediate need of water, food and shelter does not, at first sight, permit the careful preparation or participatory approach required for development and gender work. The separation of relief and development funds and personnel, the urgency and technical focus of relief work and the highly political nature of many emergencies, are all major constraints.

A number of analytical frameworks now exist to help translate policy into practice. UNHCR's (1992) People Oriented Planning (POP) in Refugee Situations looks at the context and refugee profile, the activities of women and men and their use and control

http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/Dgb4.html
of resources before and after the crisis. Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA) has been used in grassroots disaster-preparedness training in high risk areas of Bangladesh and the Philippines (Anderson and Woodrow 1989). In the Philippines, the use of CVA led to changes in programme implementation, such as separate spaces for women and children in evacuation centres, the provision of supplies to women for menstruation, and the timetabling of activities to fit the routines of both men and women.

Social relations analysis is another potentially powerful tool for work on disaster preparedness and mitigation. It highlights the relations between men and women which underpin the coping strategies adopted in response to specific emergencies. However, the amount of information needed for this type of analysis limits its use in the early stages of an emergency, unless baseline data already exists. The POP and CVA frameworks appear more practical and less threatening, especially in highly-charged refugee situations, but may result in a rather static picture of people, activities and resources rather than of the relationships between people which produce and maintain social divisions and inequalities.

Even where practitioners understand the gender issues involved, it is not always clear how to address these in programme implementation. However, there is now a considerable body of experience to draw on, from different types of emergencies. Employing community liaison staff to work in tandem with sectoral specialists offsets the tendency for relief workers to focus on technical requirements rather than talking to affected groups. Consulting women in emergencies requires flexibility and a proactive approach: in Ethiopia, women's committees have been organised around water management; in southern Sudan, separate meetings with women and men identified important issues around sanitation; and drama workshops addressed the psycho-social needs of children and women displaced by the lahar (mudflows) in the Philippines.

"Awareness of gender issues in emergencies goes beyon the traditional concern with women and children"

Emergencies are times of disempowerment and loss for both men and women and it is important not to further erode their positions. Distribution mechanisms should not undermine women's traditional areas of authority such as the management of the home, food, water and family health. Relief programmes which fail to recognise women's responsibilities for supporting dependants may put them under pressure, for example, to give sex in return for entitlements. It is also important that men are able to make constructive use of their time.

Attention to gender dimensions of spatial and time use during
displacement is important. Placing of water points, siting of shelter and the safety of public space for women are important factors in planning. Time tabling of water availability and ration distributions also have an impact on women. In Somalia, centres for therapeutic feeding, supplementary feeding and general food rations were in three separate sites, so that a woman with children requiring several types of support would have had difficulty accessing all the facilities needed.

Integrating a gender perspective into emergency responses requires different levels of approach: clarity about underlying principles, which may be formalised in policy guidelines; systematic social and gender analysis in a given context; systems and procedures which are recognised on the ground as good practice; and agreement on minimum standards. The 'bottom line' must be to include women at every level and stage.

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New ways of thinking and working are needed to overcome the dichotomy between relief and development. Relief workers need fresh insights to inform programme responses and overcome the 'tyranny of the urgent'; development workers need to tackle their ambivalence towards relief. Gender analysis can provide a common frame of reference - and a common challenge - for new ways of seeing and doing which may turn crisis into opportunity.

By Bridget Walker, Strategic Planning and Evaluation Adviser, Oxfam

Gender and Emergencies: key references

UNHCR, 1992, A Framework for People Oriented Planning in
Coping with famine in Zaire: on whose terms?

Agencies working to link relief and development recognise that poor people's coping capacity - the temporary responses of individuals, households and communities to short-term shocks or cyclical crises - is a key determinant of sustainable livelihoods. Reinforcement of indigenous coping strategies is increasingly advocated as a policy goal and monitoring of coping strategies is an important component of famine early warning systems.

However, coping strategies are rarely understood, especially when emergencies erupt in areas without prior development activities. The impact of coping is not always positive: some strategies are unsustainable and women in particular are prone to adopt negative strategies because their options are limited. This raises the danger that uncritical support of coping strategies may reinforce gender inequalities or undermine the overall capacity to cope of households (Davies 1996).

"Women and men play different but interdependent roles in the process of coping"

A focus on gender is important because women and men play different but interdependent roles in the process of coping. Their coping mechanisms are determined by social relations, institutional rules and cultural norms, within and outside the household. In general, women's coping capacity is limited by weaker entitlements and by home based responsibilities (ibid).

In the 1984 famine in Bwisha, Zaire, coping strategies included: a reduction in beer production as beer-bananas became a famine food reserve; the disposal of assets including livestock, radios and land; temporary male migration; and marriage of poor young
women to richer men, often against their will. In most cases, men were in control of the coping measures, since women were reliant upon husbands as the means to food entitlement. Widows and wives in poor polygynous households faced particular hardship (Pottier and Fairhead 1991).

Apparent greater co-operation between husbands and wives during the famine in Bwisha masked the fact that co-operation was on the husband's terms. There was strong social pressure to conceal marital disputes, since this would indicate difficulties with food supply.

"Gender sensitive policies to support coping have proved elusive"

Despite the general poor outlook for women in Bwisha, a significant minority were able to retain some financial and nutritional independence through food trade. However, the need for permission to travel from husbands and family responsibilities limited this activity (Ibid).

Gender sensitive policies to support coping have so far proved elusive. A greater understanding of gender biases in coping is needed. There is a need to support women's coping in positive ways, without undermining men's strategies, in order to reinforce overall coping capacity.

Based on:

Byrne with Baden, 1995. See resource list.


Hit or miss? Gender sensitivity in food aid distribution

Emergency relief requires an approach which is gender sensitive in order to deliver effectively to those most in need. However, gender-sensitivity is not always recognised as a practical tool conducive to programme efficiency and sustainability. A recent assessment of World Food Programme (WFP) emergency operations in selected countries found that staff often interpret WFP operational guidelines, couched in ‘gender neutral’ language, to mean the successful targeting of women with food aid. This overlooks the complex structures behind women’s gender specific vulnerability during times of crisis. Cultural sensitivity is used as an excuse for inaction on gender issues, whereas, in practice, cultural boundaries are flexible and appropriate interventions can take advantage of this (Fawzi El-Solh 1995).

Relief aid operations which register only male heads of households or community leaders as beneficiaries have serious drawbacks. Food distributed to men is often sold on the market or used to supply armed forces. Where polygynous marriage is common, as in Gaza and Tajikistan, targeting male household heads can have adverse nutritional impacts since rations have to be widely shared and the status of wives may determine their children's access to food. Men may also use food aid as a means to reinforce their control over female kin (Ibid).

"In practice, cultural boundaries are flexible and relief interventions can take advantage of this"

When only men are targeted, women not only lose access to food, but also influence over food management, an area where they previously had control. Targeting women with food aid often makes more sense, particularly where female headship and polygyny are common. It can also strengthen women's bargaining position in the household. For example, Oxfam put women at the centre of their large-scale food distribution programme to pastoralists in the Turkana region of North West Kenya, following the 1990-94 drought. They defined a household as a woman, her children and dependants who would normally eat together. Larger households got proportionally more food. Women's authority was increased by their access to important resources and nutritional status was strengthened (Byrne with Baden 1995).

However, using women to distribute food aid does not always mean that they are empowered by the process, or even that adequate amounts reach their families. In 1980, 'women-only'
distribution systems were introduced in the Khmer refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodia border, to prevent food being siphoned off for military use and to save time by halving the number of recipients. Women and girls over eight years old were allocated a fixed ration. When tickets for food aid were handed out at biannual head counts, families without enough food tried to pass ineligible children through screening gates, often disguising boys as girls. This system caused great distress and severe inequalities in access to food. It was replaced between 1986 and 1988 (Ibid).

"Men may use food aid to reinforce their control over female kin"

WFP field staff have taken initiatives which are sensitive to local gender relations. In Bosnia, mothers have been given extra rations to offset their tendency to sacrifice rations to children. Food aid has been used to support local bakeries, so that women do not have to collect firewood or stay up late baking when power supplies are available. In Bosnia and Northern Iraq, women have been involved in food distribution (Fawzi El-Solh 1995).

Participation of women is also needed in the planning, design and monitoring of relief operations, as well as in negotiations with donors. Gender-sensitive operational guidelines are required which provide a flexible framework and tools for adaptation to specific cultural contexts, encouraging local innovation. Selection of, and negotiation with, partner organisations also need to highlight awareness of the link between gender sensitivity and effective relief interventions.

Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, Independent Consultant, Oxford Zoë Oxaal, BRIDGE Research Assistant Based on:


Eritrea: maximising opportunity for women in rehabilitation

Rehabilitation after emergencies is increasingly seen as the
'overlap' between relief and development. Rehabilitation is not so much a return to the past, as an opportunity for change and development. In practice, rehabilitation refers to a wide range of measures to deal with the aftermath of an emergency, from providing resources for agriculture, to counselling after trauma and capacity building of organisations.

It is vital to consider gender issues when assessing the requirement for rehabilitation. Complex emergencies often result in a demographic shift so that women make up the majority of the post-emergency population. Rehabilitation also provides an opportunity to build on the capacities of women which may have been extended by the crisis situation. There is also scope to redress gender inequalities which may have worsened during the emergency by upholding women's rights and access to resources. However, it must not be assumed that the reconstruction of gender relations along more equitable lines is easy in highly vulnerable and socially disrupted post-emergency communities.

Oxfam used a gender perspective to evaluate its agricultural rehabilitation programme (ARP) in Eritrea (Almedom 1992). The ARP was launched in response to the 1984-5 famine with the aim of encouraging farmers to remain in their home villages and maximise food production by supplying seeds, agricultural implements and oxen or camels. Over time, the implementation of the ARP took on a flexible course, using a very broad definition of agriculture. Under the umbrella term of 'community development' the ARP provided help for developing the water supply and for housing construction. Donors were concerned by the 'non-agricultural' nature the ARP was taking. However, from a gender perspective, this broad approach was very useful because the 'community development' aspects of the ARP were potentially of much benefit to women, who were particularly concerned with the water supply. Women regarded their non-agricultural activities such as trade to be important due to the grim prospects of recovery from recurrent droughts. The gender evaluation proposed the inclusion of credit schemes for women in the ARP's community development projects.

Oxfam also proposed working with the National Union of Eritrean Women to increase the participation of women in the rehabilitation process, through joint planning of community village projects, building on the new rights and organisational strength women had gained through their involvement in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

Rehabilitation in Eritrea also involves the social and economic re-integration of ex-fighters. Women fighters experienced relative gender equality during the liberation struggle. Partly for this reason, they find re-integrating even more difficult than their male counterparts and are often regarded as a problem in post-conflict society. ACORD are engaged in a programme to assist ex-fighters, particularly women, to become economically self-reliant through the help of credit facilities (Sorensen, 1996). The ACORD programme includes loans through barefoot bankers, a revolving
fund to target the least bankable ex-fighters, training in business skills and action research on issues affecting women ex-fighters. Lack of childcare facilities is an impediment to women's re-integration as entrepreneurs, so female ex-fighters have worked as manual labourers in the construction of a day care centre.

There are similar constraints to integrating gender concerns into rehabilitation as with emergency aid, but the longer-term time framework of rehabilitation means there is more immediate scope for gender-aware interventions. The distribution of resources such as seeds, tools or land in rehabilitation offers the opportunity to redress gender inequalities. Rehabilitation efforts should work in consultation with women to establish how changes in social relations caused by an emergency can allow women to redefine their roles, build on their capacities and extend their rights.

Based on:


Currents in development and gender

From gender bias to gender awareness in economic reform

In the 1990s, gender researchers and activists have questioned dominant approaches to economic adjustment and reform, arguing that these are gender-biased. While concern remains over the potentially negative impact of adjustment policies on women, the focus has shifted to the assumptions and decision-making processes underlying economic policy design and implementation.

Some changes have occurred at both international and national levels. The World Bank is piloting 'gender-aware' adjustment policy guidelines in three countries in Africa. It has also set up an external consultative group on gender in response to demands for greater accountability. At national level, there are initiatives to bring
gender concerns into economic policy-making through the creation of new units in finance and other key ministries as well as through policy dialogue.

In a forthcoming issue, we ask whether gender bias in economic policies and processes can be overcome to introduce gender-aware economic reform, drawing on sectoral and country experiences. If you are working in this area and would like to exchange information or contribute to our forthcoming bulletin, please contact BRIDGE at the address below.

BRIDGE (briefings on development and gender) is an information analysis service specialising in gender and development issues. BRIDGE's aim is to assist development professionals in government and non-government organisations to integrate gender concerns into their work. Based at the Institute of Development Studies, in the UK, BRIDGE was set up with financial assistance from OECD-DAC agencies. This issue was funded by Action Aid, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (Geneva), UNICEF and the Special Programme, Women in Development, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS), the Netherlands.

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For further information contact:
Hazel Reeves, Manager
BRIDGE Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, United Kingdom
Tel: + 44 (0) 1273 606261, Fax: + 44 (0) 1273 621202
Email: bridge @ ids.ac.uk

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