

Not Just VICTIMS

Women in Emergencies and Disasters

Women have always had to plan for, contend with, and pick up their lives following, disasters. The gendered roles and responsibilities women have in their paid work and home lives affect women over the course of emergencies and disasters. Yet, women are not just victims: they plan for the worst, do what they have to do when they can, and respond as needed at home and on the job.

Like so many aspects of health and public health, women have particular concerns and issues that are different than those for men, and importantly, not all women have the same needs or experiences when it comes to emergencies and disasters.

Emergency planners, government relief agencies and community-based organizations would benefit from applying a gender-based analysis to their work. By understanding the particular ways that women are likely to be affected by a disaster or an emergency and the contributions that women typically make to coping with and recovering from such events, we can ensure that our communities are better prepared to manage should the worst happen.

DISASTER? EMERGENCY? CATASTROPHE?

We live in a world of risk and are surrounded by potential hazards, whether these are natural or environmental, technological, or deliberately induced (explosions, attacks). Usually we can cope with hazardous events such as basement floods or power outages. But when these transcend the ability of people and systems to cope without external assistance—it's a **disaster**.

Emergencies, by contrast, can be pretty serious events but of a scale that emergency responders and agencies can do their job. On the other extreme are **catastrophes**—disasters that are so widespread in their scope and of such a large scale that surrounding areas are also affected and emergency management systems and resources are overwhelmed and unable to cope without external aid.

Our concern here is with emergencies and disasters, where careful planning and forethought can help mitigate the results and effects. And where attention to the strengths and needs of women in the planning can be beneficial right away.

According to the Canadian Red Cross, women represent one of ten populations considered high-risk during emergencies. Within this rather large category some women need extra attention, for example those who are pregnant, have many dependents, have experienced or are experiencing abuse, and those who are socially isolated and liable to fall through the cracks.

In the Red River valley floods, the 1998 ice storm in Eastern Canada, the Toronto-area blackouts, the outbreak of SARS and other recent emergencies and disasters, it was often poor women and those living with disabilities, elderly women, Aboriginal women, single mothers and women who were socially isolated and marginalized who had the most to lose.

In Canada we have experienced relatively few destructive events or catastrophes. In the absence of dramatic events that capture the public imagination and tax community or government resources, researchers and policy makers are less motivated to do new disaster research or reconsider emergency planning strategies. Equally important, the limited information we do have seldom takes gender into account. As a result, we have insufficient data on sex and gender differences that could inform disaster planning. Moreover the focus on the possibility of large catastrophes means we neglect more common emergencies, such as flooding, heat waves, local water pollution or train derailments, which also have significant gender components.

With the support of leading UN authorities, disaster research and planning in many parts of the world are moving to think more about gender. There is growing recognition that gender is a cross-cutting principle in the disaster cycle.

The Canadian Red Cross identifies 10 populations to be at high-risk in the event of a disaster or emergency. They are:

- women
- seniors
- persons with disability
- Aboriginal residents
- medically dependent persons
- low-income residents
- children and youth
- persons with low literacy
- transient populations
- new immigrants and cultural minorities

Of course women and girls are also part of each of the last nine groups, and are often the most disadvantaged among them.

WHY DO WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT WOMEN IN EMERGENCIES?

Women and men, girls and boys may go through the same disaster, but they are likely to experience it differently. For instance women and men may face different health risks: Men are statistically more likely than women to suffer heart disease and their risks of heart attack may be increased by the stress of an emergency. Women are more physically vulnerable to the effects of heat waves, and heavily pregnant women may need special transportation or other supports during emergencies.

Gender roles and stereotypes likewise affect the experiences of women and men during disasters. Women are frequently assigned to tend the ill and injured because they are expected to be natural nurturers, or because they are the overwhelming majority of paid caregivers. Men are expected to be physically stronger than women and therefore will more often be called upon to engage in hard labour during emergencies. Men's priorities in preparing for and responding to emergencies often dominate family debates. And men are usually the ones to decide whether or not to buy insurance or to put up hurricane shutters, as well as when to evacuate, where to go, what to take, how to live, and when to return. At the same time, households headed by women are often seen as vulnerable and in need of financial or other assistance because it is assumed that single mothers or grandmothers either will not or cannot prepare their homes and families for a disaster.

Gender can also place women and men at different risks of disaster. The SARS epidemic disproportionately affected women and their families, because there are more women working in the health care system. Women are more likely to live in poor housing, which can be too flimsy to withstand earthquakes or tornadoes.

In the wake of disasters, women's experiences are also quite different from those of men. In paid or unpaid realms, women offer more sustained emotional support to disaster victims, as volunteers, as paid workers and as family members. Economic relief and recovery packages often do not reflect women's dominance in informal, part-time and home-based labour where they generate essential income. The economic impacts on women can be severe when the loss of a home also means the loss of working supplies, work spaces, equipment, inventory, markets and credit lines.

Women suffer in the aftermath of disasters when social networks are frayed, when family and kin are displaced, and when they feel the cumulative effects of caring for others, including for men and boys not well served by disaster mental health care and facilities. Women also face an increased risk of domestic violence: Studies have found that there are many more calls to women's shelters as much as a year after an emergency. But women's support networks are vital to the resiliency women have in restoring their lives.

Not only are women differently affected than men by disasters, but also different groups of women will have different needs and will respond differently in the midst of emergencies. For example, the needs of elderly women in remote Métis villages are likely to be very different from the needs of lesbian couples in Toronto if a disaster strikes. Similarly, farm women will have different concerns from young mothers in an inner city. Such differences need to be taken into account in preparing for disasters or too many women will be left out.

WOMEN'S WORK IN DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

At home, on the job and in the community, women do have considerable strengths to offer in preparing for disasters, but frequently women have not been consulted. Women and women's agencies have a long history of coping with crises, despite being shut out from high level discussions and resource planning. Imagine if women were included in ways that build on their strengths!

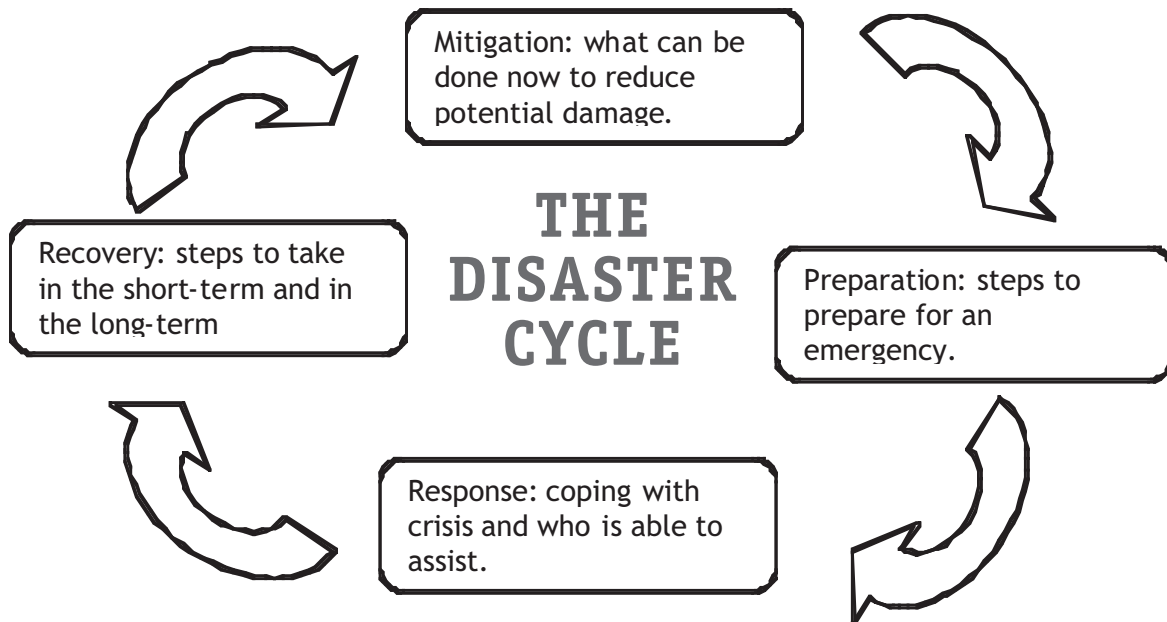
Women at home

Though household roles and responsibilities have certainly changed in recent generations, with more men involved directly in housework and raising children, it is also true that women are overwhelmingly responsible for domestic chores. These roles and responsibilities do not vanish in the event of a disaster. In fact, they often just become much harder to do. Torn by wanting to help in the community and assist neighbours, women also cook for their families and neighbours, care for children, the elderly and other loved ones without their usual equipment and resources. And very often they are faced with setting up a home in cramped and unfavourable conditions, or having to clean up in the aftermath. As women are more likely to live in poverty and in poor housing, they can be at greater risk when their homes are threatened. Women are disproportionately likely to live in housing that is dangerous to start with (e.g., trailer homes), near neighborhood contaminants (e.g., hazardous facilities on reserves and near other low-income communities), and to have inadequate nutrition and other resources to draw upon. These everyday factors increase the vulnerability of low-income residents and can become magnified in emergencies. If evacuated, women are likely to remain in temporary accommodations much longer than men.

Because of their roles in the home and community, however, women are also very knowledgeable about their neighbours. Women know who is most in danger, where they live and what they will need. Women often have complex social networks that they use to get in touch with friends and family, and that provide them with information and warnings sooner than men's contacts. Research shows that women are quicker to seek out information about hazards and to help their family and communities to prepare for disasters. Women are more likely to respond quickly, too, to evacuation orders. Women have been found to be more likely to warn others of imminent disaster and to assist in long-term recovery.

Recovery is not a sudden change, a problem that disappears when the waters go down or the debris is cleared away. Recovering from an emergency or disaster may continue long after the immediate threat or destruction has passed. Women's psychological stress can manifest as anxiety and depression, while some male partners may cope by being abusive. As families and communities work to re-build their lives, many women are likely to be harmed by their male partners, brothers or sons. Calls to domestic violence centres and housing continue for months following disasters.

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Women on the job

In the paid workforce, away from home or in home-based businesses, women bring critical income to their families. Their ability to continue or resume paid work depends in great part on how well disaster mitigation takes women's concerns into account. If decision-makers do not consider child care a priority, women cannot return to their external jobs. Women very often depend on public transportation to get to and from their jobs and so cannot travel easily without it, but attention to rebuilding infrastructure may not take this into account. During recovery, fewer women-headed businesses receive government post-disaster loans.

Women are unlikely to be recognized leaders in established economic and political organizations responding to disaster and are much less visible in male-dominated first responder occupations. For women whose jobs are to provide emergency response, there are also particular concerns. After the SARS crisis in Toronto, nurses shared stories of having ill-fitting equipment that was not adapted to their size and shape. They spoke of the need to check on family and children, even as they were determined to contribute to helping with the emergency. Military women have also expressed feeling pulled in many directions by their desire to do their work, while simultaneously worrying about family—more so than the men in the same military jobs.

WOMEN'S WORK IN DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES CONT'D

Support is essential for women with family responsibilities to do their paid jobs well during disasters or as emergency responders. Human resource policy and practice in emergency management should be designed to accommodate employees' family responsibilities to ensure that women and men have appropriate family leave, child and elder care, and opportunities for part-time employment or respite.

Women in the community

Grassroots agencies that already serve women are well placed to draw on their existing resources and strengths in the event of an emergency. Resource centres, community health clinics, transition homes and shelters, though stretched in many ways, do have staff and leaders who think effectively in crisis, have networks with sister agencies and know the needs of the women they serve. With some further planning, on a somewhat larger scale, grassroots agencies can prepare for emergencies and disasters, including becoming knowledgeable about local emergency plans and roles and responsibilities of the various levels of emergency response authorities.

Part of the need for the specific planning, beyond regular work-place safety, is that in the event of a disaster or emergency, women may turn to the resource centre where they feel safe and known. If there are women already residing there, how will the centre manage if cut off from daily supplies of food, water, diapers or medicines? How will the agency manage if many more women need their help in a disaster?

At the same time, emergency planners could benefit enormously from the skills, knowledge and networks of grassroots agencies. Making use of the existing resources would be particularly beneficial for the surrounding community.

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UNDERSTANDING WHAT WOMEN AND GIRLS NEED AND CAN DO

During the past 15 years, our understanding of the role of gender in disasters has advanced considerably. A variety of case studies, along with research studies on topics such as evacuation and risk perception, have yielded significant information about predictable gender-based inequalities that undermine women's resilience in the face of disasters.

Despite these advances in our knowledge, the particular needs of women seemed to be acknowledged mainly in the wake of disasters, when they were over. Following the Indian Ocean tsunami, for example, it became apparent that girls and women were three or more times as likely as men to die. Conversely, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the US, it became clear that women's social networks saved lives. Governments and agencies often realize they need help with gender issues only after disaster has struck.

In Canada, as in most developed nations, women's issues are rarely considered in emergency planning or response efforts, either in public information or more formal training programs. Indeed, documents and materials posted on governmental and non-governmental websites yield more information about pets, by far, than about specific issues women (or men) should consider in preparing for the unexpected. There are no mentions of the need for women's underwear, extra food for nursing mothers, clothes for returning to jobs, tampons, women's greater need for chronic disease medications, how to assist elderly and frail women who live alone, or where to turn if abused.

The absence of gender analysis and limited uptake of existing knowledge about women and gender in disaster undermines the capacity of national and local emergency planners to develop plans that are inclusive, appropriate and cost effective. In other words, gender-based analysis provides critical information for planning on key issues, such as women's evacuation behaviour, long-term economic recovery, and violence prevention. Indeed human rights can be endangered in crises when gender equity is not part of the working culture of emergency practitioners and gender knowledge is not reflected in their practical tool kits.

Six Principles to Take Women & Gender into Account in Relief and Reconstruction:

THINK BIG. Gender equality and risk reduction principles must guide all aspects of disaster mitigation (including planning and preparation), response and reconstruction. The "window of opportunity" for change and political organization closes very quickly.

GET THE FACTS. Gender analysis is not optional or divisive but imperative to direct aid and plan for full and equitable recovery. Nothing in disaster work is "gender neutral."

WORK WITH GRASSROOTS WOMEN. Women's community organizations have insight, information, experience, networks, and resources vital to increasing disaster resilience.

RESIST STEREOTYPES. Base all initiatives on knowledge of difference and specific cultural, economic, political, and sexual contexts, not on false generalities.

TAKE A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH. Democratic and participatory initiatives serve women and girls best. Women and men alike must be assured of the conditions of life needed to enjoy their fundamental human rights, as well as simply survive. Girls and women in crisis are at increased risk of violence, rape, losing their land, and job loss.

RESPECT AND DEVELOP THE CAPACITIES OF WOMEN. Avoid overburdening women with already heavy work loads and family responsibilities likely to increase.

Source: Gender and Disaster Network

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Why, we might well ask, is gender so conspicuously absent, when ethnicity, age, income, literacy, physical/mental ability and other factors are acknowledged as significant influences on vulnerability in the context of disasters, and there are gendered aspects to all of these factors?

Part of the answer lies in emergency management's long history as male and military occupations and work cultures. Moreover, the lack of interest or time in emergency planning by most gender specialists and women at the community level serves to reinforce the *status quo* of male leadership in this area. The extensive and exhausting labour of women working with friends, family and extended kin is less visible and valued than the focus on hard-working men sandbagging or clearing rubble, even though women's efforts to arrange alternative housing and child care, provide uninterrupted care for persons in fragile health or move important cultural materials or resources to safety are also essential. Generic language such as "parents," "caregivers," and "responders," tends to mask significant gender differences in the roles and work undertaken by women. In other words, women's work during disasters is "hidden in plain sight," despite being the majority of paid care givers.

HOW CAN DISASTER MANAGEMENT BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO WOMEN?

Planning with a gender lens does not just mean "add women and stir," but involves a new way of approaching emergency management that sees women and men as full and equal partners in the management of risk. The key is learning to ask the right questions, and then seeking data, information, knowledge and insight from community members to find answers.

At every stage of the disaster cycle, decision makers and practitioners need sound evidence collected with attention to: 1) sex and gender differences through the life course, 2) differences across diverse populations of women, 3) shifts in relevant national patterns and trends, and 4) applications throughout the disaster life course of preparedness, mitigation/adaptation, response and recovery.

There are already databases that can provide important information for planning, such as the percentage of women in different age groups known to be at risk (the young, the old) or the percentage of women with functional language or literacy limitations. Sex-specific employment data can also indicate women's relative exposure to hazardous materials or working conditions, and hence to increased risk in the event of a hazardous materials spill or pandemic. For example, women were disproportionately affected by the SARS epidemic because women are the vast majority of health care workers. Likewise, health conditions related to sex and gender can be tracked and factored in as risk factors by local emergency medical planners, and sex-specific data on health status can be used by planners to pre-position supplies or target populations in risk communication.

Planners need to know how the everyday lives of women are shaped by gender differences and by inequalities at every stage of the disaster planning cycle.

Other types of data may be used related to employment and earning strategies and to the dependence of women on natural resources; where homeless women go for shelter and support; what community agencies, if any, are lifelines for sexual minorities. Community information that can be used could include the availability in different populations of extended kin networks of support, the relative safety of girls and women in public and private spaces, and the groups and organizations that ground and support women in their communities.

In addition to collecting statistics, planners need to know how the everyday lives of women are shaped by gender differences and by inequalities at every stage of the disaster planning cycle. The first step in understanding the role of gender in disasters is to “see” and appreciate what women and girls do and where they are every day. Planners also need to adopt a human rights approach to disaster management because without this commitment they are unlikely to understand or respond to inequalities based on gender power.

Finally, planners need to look beyond vulnerabilities to consider what capacities, resources, and skills women in different life circumstances bring to emergency preparedness, response and recovery. Women’s social networks, skills and resources, and life experiences can all be brought to bear on emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

CONCLUSION

Using gender-based analysis can contribute directly to increasing the readiness of Canadian families, businesses and communities for any eventuality, and can be extremely useful for anticipating and taking steps to reduce the different and potentially disproportionate effects of disaster on women and on men. Disaster research and planning are moving in this direction internationally with support from leading UN authorities and growing recognition of the importance of gender as a “cross-cutting principle” in efforts to reduce and manage risk. At the community level, building partnerships for gender-sensitive participatory action research would be excellent foundation for community-based disaster risk management and a promising path for reducing the nation’s vulnerability to the hazards and disasters of our future.

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other resources

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Provides case studies and other good sources, such as *Selected resources on gender and disaster* (2005) and the *Gender and disaster sourcebook* (2006).

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who we are and what we do

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ordering information

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“Gender relations shape the everyday lives of women and men, girls and boys across (Canada) and significant gender-based inequalities still put many girls and women at increased risk. As the nation faces an increasingly hazardous and disaster-prone future, it is all the more imperative that gender differences and inequalities be reflected in federal, provincial and territorial emergency management policy and practice. Equally, the nation cannot achieve disaster resilience without the benefit of women’s skills, capacities, resources and life experiences.... Increasing our knowledge in these areas and sharing good practice with respect to gender and disaster risk reduction can only increase our ability as a nation to anticipate, prepare for, cope with, and recover from disasters.”

~ Gender and Disaster Network of Canada, www.gdnc.ca



Thinking Women:

A Series on Health Care Reform and Women