

## Women in humanitarian action



Kate Sutton  
1 February 2013

**This is not an article about gender – it is an article about women. We know that women and girls are affected by disasters and conflict differently from men and boys, and that despite this knowledge humanitarian responses frequently fail to consider their needs in assessments and programming. We know that women can be powerful agents of change. In humanitarian leadership positions they are able to influence the way that programmes are designed and run, yet there is little research and work being done on promoting women in leadership positions and supporting their contribution in the humanitarian space.**

Recognising that most discussion about women sits within the technical sphere of “gender,” it is hard to avoid using the term – but where possible this article intends to refer to women. This is partly to avoid the tendency to use the word “gender” as a catchall term to cover anything in the humanitarian sphere to do with men and women, but mostly it is because the article is about women. It is about the real and potential role of women in humanitarian response. It is about what we know and what we are failing to do as humanitarian actors to support and promote women as agents of change.

### We know disasters impact men and women differently

In natural disasters, women are more likely to die than men. In 1991, during the cyclone disasters in Bangladesh, of the 140,000 people who died, 90% were women.<sup>1</sup> Four times as many women as men died in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Much research has been carried out on the reasons for the discrepancy, and they often relate to the household and reproductive roles of women. This includes their responsibility for children and elderly in the event of a disaster and their reduced ability to survive some physical threats. In the aftermath of a disaster this has important repercussions for the women that have survived. Women may have to take on an expanded caring role for extended family and friends. Disaster situations always increase the time women spend in their unpaid household role.<sup>2</sup> This may include time queuing for food and non-food items, additional time collecting water or firewood when original sources have been damaged, caring for children that are no longer able to attend school... and so the list goes on. This is not to mention the loss of both formal and informal income-generating activities that women may have previously engaged in, such as running small home-based businesses.

Women are also increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence in emergency situations. The separation of women from families and communities in the context of breakdown of law and order and societal norms means that sexual violence often takes place with impunity.<sup>3</sup> The eastern Democratic Republic of Congo presents one of the most tragic examples of sexual violence in a humanitarian context, where at least 200,000 cases of sexual violence have been documented since 1996, mostly against women and girls.<sup>4</sup> Social trauma in such situations aggravates stress levels in the family, which may contribute to incidents of domestic violence.

### We know women can be important change agents in humanitarian contexts

We know women can be critical actors in all phases of emergency response: planning, preparation, response, and recovery. This is true both in their own communities and from within the humanitarian community. In research carried out following the post-election violence in the Solomon Islands, it was

discovered that women were well aware of the fact that violence was likely to erupt in the wake of the voting process. In spite of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands' (RAMSI's) large presence to detect and respond to civil unrest, the resulting violence came as a complete surprise to the international community – no one had asked any women or factored in gender-sensitive conflict indicators.<sup>5</sup>

In Colombia, pressure from women's groups during the 1980s and 1990s was pivotal in pressuring the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to engage in peace talks in 1999.<sup>6</sup> When involved in planning, research suggests that women are generally more inclusive, less hierarchical, and more accountable.<sup>7</sup> This may be in part because they tend to focus on community benefit over and above personal financial or social gain. These examples among countless others have reinforced the importance of having women involved in preventing and responding to humanitarian situations. It is well recognised that women can play a pivotal decision-making, communication, and coordination role in humanitarian response if supported to do so.

## We know we are not doing enough to promote women in humanitarian action

Humanitarian actors have taken steps to better recognise and respond to the differential impact of disasters on men and women and to involve women in response operations at the community level. Most notably in the sector, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) developed a gender handbook that offers practical guidance on identifying and addressing the differing needs and situations of women, girls, boys, and men.<sup>8</sup> Despite the handbooks and some achievements in the field, we know that we are failing to do enough at two levels. First, we are failing at the country level to engage and support women to take part in humanitarian preparedness and response nationally and in their own communities. Second, we are not doing enough at a global level to promote women in leadership positions in the humanitarian community – neither among donors, the UN, or NGOs.

The recent Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) 2011 that focused on “addressing the gender challenge” found that gender considerations, including an adequate assessment and response to the specific needs of women, are still not consistently prioritised.<sup>9</sup> Consideration of the needs of women continues to be regarded as a luxury rather than a priority in humanitarian contexts. A donor representative in Somalia was quoted saying: “In truth, this is not a priority; it's more of a ‘tick the box’ approach. The scale and complexities of the crisis mean there are more important issues to address.”<sup>10</sup>

Within the humanitarian community, leadership is predominantly male. In preparing the HRI, hundreds of field representatives are interviewed every year. In 2011, over two-thirds of senior managers interviewed were men (68%). This ratio is noted to have remained constant over the past five years, and the 2011 report concludes that “the humanitarian sector is still too male-dominated.”<sup>11</sup> The proposed reasons for the imbalance include women self-selecting out of humanitarian contexts, the tension between caring roles and professional responsibilities, and the long hours and challenging contexts in which humanitarian programming takes place. There may also be a number of attitudinal and cultural barriers for women to overcome in order to take up management positions. The Leadership in Action report by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) suggests that the reasons why there are fewer women than men in leadership positions require more research. It states that “it is not clear whether gender-based discrimination presents particular barriers to women in obtaining and succeeding in operational leadership roles” and that it is a “rich area of exploration that deserves further research in relation to humanitarian leadership.”<sup>12</sup>

## We need to know more about the benefits of female leadership

So the question has to be asked. Would make any difference to have more women in leadership positions in the humanitarian community? There is little concrete research or evidence regarding the issue and it is difficult to imagine the possibility of conducting a case-control study comparing the effectiveness of a gender-balanced humanitarian response team and a male-dominated one. However, in the absence of research data there are strong arguments to be made for more proactive support and promotion of gender-balanced leadership.

We bring our whole selves into humanitarian situations:<sup>13</sup> cultural background, socio-economic background, our preconceptions, and - critically - we bring our gender. There are certain approaches and perspectives that women and men bring automatically and intuitively. These intuitive areas do not require learned techniques or tools to inform decisions. Women leaders will automatically think about the potential for sexual violence, where women might feel safe or unsafe, what hygiene items are necessary, and what makes women feel included and respected in decision-making processes. This is not to say that men do not or can not think about these things - it is just that it may be less intuitive and automatic. As women - if it applies to us, then it will be foremost in our minds.

It is also a reality that women are likely to feel more comfortable communicating with other women, and even more so with women from their own culture. If the humanitarian community is serious about engaging women in response, a strong women's voice is needed. This voice needs to be able to reach and communicate with women in the field and needs to be given the opportunity to communicate and influence at the decision-making level.

## We need to know more about the constraints and enablers

We need to better understand why women are currently disproportionately underrepresented at leadership levels. Research needs to map out the constraints and enablers for international women, and even more importantly for national women, for taking up and thriving in decision-making positions in humanitarian organisations. In the meantime, the humanitarian community needs to act on the areas that we know will encourage women to actively engage at higher levels of management. These steps should include:

- More proactive mentoring of national women in humanitarian contexts to become leaders of change.
- Provision of child care options within NGO and UN offices for national staff. These should be innovative and flexible options enabling travel with child care staff, nurseries in work places, private rooms for breast-feeding, and financial assistance for child care.
- Part-time work options.
- Ensuring codes of conduct clearly prohibit sexual discrimination.
- Proactively addressing any discrimination issues that arise.

Humanitarian Advisory Group is an organisation that is committed to supporting and promoting women in humanitarian action. If you or your organisation have any comments on this article or on the topic in general we would welcome [hearing from you](#).

## About the author

[Kate Sutton](#) is a partner of Humanitarian Advisory Group and a Board Member of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre based in Melbourne, Australia. Kate has a Master of Human Rights Law and a Master of International Development, and has worked for more than twelve years in the sector, eight of those years being based in the field. Kate has specialist expertise in humanitarian emergency response programming, refugee and IDP programming and humanitarian protection. In Albania and Afghanistan Kate was responsible for the development and management of refugee and IDP programmes working in partnership with UNHCR and the respective government bodies. Subsequently Kate became a Protection Specialist on the Global Rapid Response Team for World Vision and was deployed to humanitarian responses including the Asia Tsunami response; Sri Lankan IDP crisis and the response to political violence in Kenya. Most recently Kate has worked as the Humanitarian and Advocacy Manager for Oxfam in Timor Leste and led the inter-agency initiative to develop protection mainstreaming standards that were published in 2012.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), “[Disaster and Gender Statistics](#)”.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) 2003, [Handbook for estimating the socio-economic and environmental effects of disasters](#).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “[Addressing Sexual Violence in Humanitarian Settings](#)”.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women, “[Facts & Figures on VAW](#)”

<sup>5</sup> Romer, Kate and Andre Romer 2007, “Re-emerging conflict in the Solomon Islands? The underlying causes and triggers of the riots of April 2006”, *Peace, conflict & development*, no. 10, pp. 1-23.

<sup>6</sup> United States Agency for International Development (USAID) 2006, [Women and Conflict: An Introductory Guide for Programming](#).

<sup>7</sup> Anti-Corruption Research Network, “[Gender and Corruption](#)”.

<sup>8</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2006, [Women, girls, boys & men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities: IASC Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action](#).

<sup>9</sup> DARA 2011, [Humanitarian Response Index 2011](#).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.55.

<sup>12</sup> Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), 2011, [Leadership in Action: Leading effectively in humanitarian operations](#), pp.52-53

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.