The Unified Approach: USAID/OFDA Addresses Gender in Disaster Work

Empowering women can help communities reduce disaster risks and recover faster after disaster strikes, according to findings of a series of visits that USAID/OFDA recently conducted in three countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. The visits were part of USAID/OFDA's increased efforts to help emergency managers throughout LAC address gender issues in disaster management programming.

USAID/OFDA has a long history of promoting gender and marginalized populations issues through the support, study, and application of empowerment-based initiatives within disaster risk reduction (DRR).

"Successful risk management and disaster response must be based upon the broadest possible social participation," noted USAID/OFDA Disaster Risk Management Specialist Ricardo Berganza. USAID/OFDA maintains that every human component of a community is integral to the well-being, protection, and recovery of the community in the face of social emergencies or natural disasters.

When disaster strikes, men, women, girls, and boys exhibit different vulnerabilities and strengths.
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They face different risks, are affected in different ways, and respond differently to the threats and opportunities they encounter. Although gender is not synonymous with women, there is often a focus on women's empowerment in gender work, due to the disadvantaged position that many women experience in societies across the world.

Disasters can also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities within a population, burdening each individual with new and greater responsibilities that may affect their ability to cope. However, such crises can also provide an opportunity for governments and humanitarian organizations to recognize and capitalize on the existing strengths of a diverse population.

One commonly overlooked resource during large-scale crises is the knowledge and networking capacity of affected populations, in particular, women. Through workshops and conferences that include regional emergency organization representatives -- whose members are predominantly working-age males -- USAID/OFDA is helping shed light on how women, as the cohesive household unit, caretaker for family members, and often the primary individual with knowledge of, and access to necessary resources such as food and medicine, can reveal a wealth of options and alternatives to a recovery based largely on foreign aid assistance.

Last July, USAID/OFDA staff members from the LAC regional office and Washington, D.C., headquarters conducted field visits to Chile, Guatemala, and Jamaica to assess the status of gender issues in disaster work. Findings confirmed the results of previous studies on gender-related issues in the aftermath of disasters, including, but not limited to: an increase in female-headed households, due either to the death or migration of a spouse; an increase in female communal responsibilities as a result of the dissolution of social service mechanisms; and a rise in sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, and abuse emerging from a lack of security and general lawlessness.

The visits also highlighted a need to utilize and build upon the skills and capacities of individuals in affected communities. The same women who take on household and community responsibilities, for instance, can often provide targeted information and support during the disaster recovery process. Involving women in the process can strengthen programming and empower them as leaders and agents of change in their communities. Similarly, recruiting men to assist with outreach to other men can help encourage males to access services they may have previously ignored, such as mental health services. And engaging men, women, boys, and girls on issues of sexual and gender-based violence and/or exploitation and abuse, can lead to better reporting and prevention.

USAID/OFDA’s efforts to save lives, alleviate suffering, and reduce the social and economic impact of disasters while incorporating gender concerns are further aligned with the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA). Adopted at the first World Conference on DRR in January 2005, the HFA calls for the global integration of gender into all disaster risk management policies, plans, and decision-making processes.

“Failing to integrate gender and marginalized populations into programming signifies a failure to meet the needs of the populations served and increases vulnerability as a whole. As we move towards the post-2015 framework for DRR (HFA2), it is clear that more work needs to be done to better incorporate gender into disaster work,” said USAID/OFDA Program Officer Kate Reid, who helps coordinate support for gender and disasters issues for the LAC regional office.

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USAID/OFDA Support Helps Communities Flourish through Women’s Grassroots Initiatives

In September, USAID/OFDA awarded a one-year, $150,000 grant to the Huairou Commission global partnership coalition for gender-related DRR work in the LAC region. The USAID/OFDA-supported project, titled “Center Staging Women’s Priorities and Leadership in LAC Disaster Risk Reduction Efforts”, will work with grassroots women's organizations in Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Peru to influence disaster management efforts in their countries. The USAID/OFDA-supported work will build on the Huairou Commission’s previous DRR work in the region, which has empowered women in at-risk communities to better respond to and mitigate the effects of natural disasters.

The project will focus on training and capacity building in DRR and relationship-building between grassroots women’s organizations and national and local disaster risk management authorities. Women in these organizations will share their knowledge and experiences as leaders in Community Practitioners' Platforms (CPPs). CPPs bring together local leaders from economically disadvantaged and disaster-prone communities to exchange experiences, demonstrate their skills, and advocate for more responsive programs and policies at the community level. In doing so, they network across communities and towns, linking local organizations, business people, individuals, and government. Women in CPPs have conducted risk mapping and risk-awareness education in communities, established and implemented vulnerability reducing practices, and developed DRR plans in partnership with government authorities.

The Huairou Commission’s project is part of a regional campaign to support and strengthen existing expertise among grassroots women’s groups in community-based DRR. The campaign aims to strengthen the leadership capacity of the groups to advance local action on DRR and strengthen community participation and women’s empowerment in DRR through collaborative actions among government agencies, grassroots local organizations, and other key actors. Lessons learned from the project will help guide support for similar initiatives in other countries of the region.

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

Photo by Auriana Koutnik, USAID/OFDA

Earthquake-affected women in Peru share a vision for improving their reinforced-adobe neighborhood during a visit to evaluate the USAID/OFDA-supported project to rebuild houses with increased seismic resistance.