

Emergency Telecommunications: Engendering Prevention and Response¹

Training should be geared not only to those who are developing and implementing appropriate technologies and applications, but also [...] to the users, to allow them to make the best use of what can be made available. ²

In most communities women perform the roles of key communicators and care givers. However, in disaster reduction activities they are most often marginalized. In general, reducing disaster risk involves effective preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery and is partly dependent on access to, and the appropriate use of, emergency telecommunications by vulnerable local communities and national and international institutions. A gender sensitive approach to effective and coherent disaster reduction accepts that those community members who are key communicators and care givers during normal weather conditions and peace time are also key actors before, during and after disasters. Given this reality, it is logical that they should be key participants in those training and capacity building activities that relate to reducing disaster risk.

Experience with both natural and man-made disasters highlight the simple truth that telecommunications are useful only to the extent that they are accessible to, and useable by, women and men in communities at risk. During disaster events many vulnerable communities are often cut off from national response systems due to a lack of appropriate telecommunications that should have been put in place before the disaster occurs. As disaster specialists note: while disaster telecommunications are used during the response and initial recovery (transition) phase, *effectiveness is partially reflective of preparedness*.

Therefore, decisions regarding who is trained in the use of telecommunications for disaster relief and recovery activities must take into consideration the roles of both women and men. For example, an analysis of the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh reveals that the largest number of casualties was women in part because their clothing prevented them from climbing to safer areas such as roof tops. In addition, because of

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² ITU. 2001. **Handbook on disaster communications**. ITU-D Study Group 2. Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union: Geneva.

the segregation between the sexes, many women did not receive the disaster warnings.³

Building on Local Solutions to Redress Gender Inequality

Telecommunication is important before, during and after disasters because it enables government and international institutions to give warning of the impending disaster, to coordinate relief efforts and get information to those affected after disaster strikes. It is often the case that traditional telecommunication infrastructure is rendered inoperable after natural and man-made disasters. Further, many rural poor areas in developing countries already lack basic telecommunication infrastructure and do not have access to telecommunications to begin with.

Local programmes, such as the GrameenPhone in Bangladesh, offer an effective, affordable and local solution to the telecommunication challenges experienced by relief organisations involved in disaster mitigation activities. The GrameenPhone program is implemented by Grameen Telecom (GTC) in cooperation with Grameen Bank, the micro-credit lender. This programme targets women from rural areas in Bangladesh. They are provided with the necessary financial resources to purchase a mobile phone which they in turn lease to other community members. This community mobile phone service enables female participants to both generate income and enhances their social status within their households and communities. GrameenPhone provides access to telecommunications by over "60 million people [... in] more than 68,000 villages in 61 districts" in Bangladesh.⁴

This programme has the potential to be critical in the context of disasters because the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) allows connectivity through satellites in most parts of the world. This feature is particularly important when neither land lines nor terrestrial antennas are available to provide access to communication services, such as in disasters. Further, because women are the primary communicators in their households and communities and are often the ones to both heed warnings of disasters and plan for them, governments and disaster relief agencies stand to benefit from utilising this programme and the women who participate in it during times of disasters. Village phones systems such as the GrameenPhone can be transformed into an important element of the emergency telecommunications system. Such an approach has the potential to not only save lives and lower damages, but will also acknowledge and empower women to actively participate in disaster response.

In identifying communities at risk it is also important to consider the make-up of households. In those low-income communities where there is a prevalence of female-headed households, women must be identified and targeted for training in disaster reduction activities, including in the use of emergency telecommunications

³ South Pacific Disaster Reduction Program. 2002. "Gender, Households, Community and Disaster Management: Case Studies from the Pacific islands." SOPAC.

⁴ <http://www.grameenphone.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=3:11:1>

equipment. Such training is critical because most often telecommunications used in disasters are focussed on providing information from the disaster site to relief and rescue agencies and vice versa in order to save lives and reduce suffering. Thus such training in the use of telecommunications also "serves the needs of the providers of assistance".⁵

Data on women as participants during disaster response is emerging. From available anecdotal information and case studies it is clear that women, because of their multiple roles within their households and communities, serve important functions before and after disasters, including the purchase of radios and batteries. Because they tend to avoid risk, women are more apt to heed warnings and prepare for disasters. At the local level they are active providers of assistance such as food. The Yokohama World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (1994) recognised this contribution from, and potential of, women.

Engendering disaster preparedness and response – but why?

When women and men confront routine or catastrophic disasters, their responses tend to mirror their status, role and position in society.⁶

The importance of involving women in disaster preparedness and the promotion of gender sensitive responses invoke scepticism in the minds of many. This is partly because at the theoretical level the field offers little space for bringing in those issues that are directly related to women and men. Within this context, emergency telecommunications have been mainly defined as the challenge of establishing and maintaining the proper infrastructure. However all disasters are experienced locally by the children, women and men who live and work in the affected communities. Given this human dimension, approaches focused on the use of communications to facilitate disaster preparedness and response must substantively engage women as actors and not only as victims.

Like age, being a man or a woman shapes an individual's lived experience. This is in part because the ways in which women and men navigate their communities as

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ DAW. 2001. "Environmental Management and the Mitigation of Natural Disasters: a Gender Perspective." Report of the Expert Group Meeting, Ankara, Turkey, 6-9 November 2001. United Nations: New York.

“women” and as “men” and their relations with institutions and with each other partly inform their experiences. In the context of disasters, though gender is not always or necessarily the defining factor in an individual's experience of, or response to catastrophe, it is a relevant dimension for both women and men.⁷ For example, men are more at risk of death during armed conflicts, while women are more open to listening to early warnings before a natural disaster strikes because they tend to be risk averse.

Our experiences of disasters increasingly confirm the critical role of disaster communications before and after a disaster hits. Effective preparation for, and response to, disasters partially depend on the availability of communications as well as its use by those women and men of the community who are well placed to alert community members about emergency preparations, such as shelters, as well as inform them about available resources. Within this context the participation of women in emergency preparation and response is critical and their access to, and use of, emergency telecommunications are essential components in reducing risk.

⁷ Enarson, Elaine et al. 2003. "Working with women at risk: practical guidelines for assessing local disaster risk." International Hurricane Center, University of South Florida.