# The Importance of Gender & Participation to the Work of Disasters & Emergencies
## by Françoise Praline Coupal

Gender and participation are emerging issues for the disaster community. While there is general recognition that women, children & the elderly are the most vulnerable there is a need to look at how disasters involve and impact on women & men differently & how diverse voices can be included & heard in all levels of disaster management & decision-making in order to make development & disaster interventions more effective.

There are a number of reasons why a gender and participation aspect is important in the work of disasters and emergencies:

- **Women and men's existing capacities and vulnerabilities determine the way they respond to crises.** The aim of disaster interventions should be to increase capacity and reduce vulnerability. Understanding how men and women, youth and the elderly respectively define vulnerability according to their perception & experience of the environment is critical in overcoming future obstacles and vulnerabilities.

- **Disasters involve women and men differently and understanding this may ensure our interventions do not exacerbate gender disparities.** Women are key family health managers and community organizers. During times of emergencies and disasters, women's participation is often an extension of her domestic work, providing food and meeting shelter needs of the local population. Men are usually involved in high-risk search and rescue activities and at the forefront of decision-making although women are often in the background as the key community organizers. Understanding these roles, ensuring they are not exacerbated and

supporting women and men who take on different roles is essential in good management. Indeed, the voices of both are required for informed decision-making.

- **Differential needs.** All too often needs assessment fail to disagggregate the population by age, gender and ethnicity which lead to international humanitarian assistance that is inappropriate and wasteful. Shelter, nutritional needs and appropriate medical interventions need to be disaggregated by age, gender and ethnicity to ensure sensitive and appropriate interventions.

- **Women and men experience disasters differently according to their gender roles.** Women by virtue of their lower social, economic and political status tend to be more vulnerable to disasters. They are more likely to suffer domestic violence and be excluded from post reconstruction activities that target men. Men have difficulty coping with their loss of status and productive work which is often reflected in high rates of alcoholism and abusive behaviour. Strategies to provide psycho-social support can lessen the adverse effects of disaster for women, men and their families.

- **Reconstruction provides opportunities for social change.** Gender roles can change rapidly as a result of disasters. These can be opportunities to redefine social relations that are more equitable and sustainable. But, to do so, reconstruction and preparedness initiatives must be anchored in sound and responsive development interventions.

Indeed, when involved in disaster preparedness there are a number of critical questions that one should be asking:

1. **Institutional Framework:** Is the Ministry responsible for gender or women's issues included in the disaster management co-ordination unit?  Are people's human rights protected by the Ministry of Justice during and following emergencies?  Are locally based NGOs represented at all levels of decision-making:  national, regional and locally?  At the community level, are women and men, youth and the elderly represented?

2. **Information, Collection and Analysis:** Is information gathering extractive or empowering?  To what degree does it involve the local population?  Who owns the information?  Do interventions take into account local experiences in dealing with disasters in the past?  How does the local population define vulnerability?  Is this differentiated by age and gender?  Is adequate information available on different people's coping strategies to adequately guide hazard mitigation strategies?  Whose and what indicators will you use to measure progress?

3. **Prioritization of hazards and activities.**  Are decision-making structures to guide resource allocation for disaster mitigation and preparedness sufficiently representative of different social groups?  Do activities reflect the varied needs and priorities of women and men, youth and the elderly?  Do you have a representative sample of various stakeholder groups to ensure your interventions are representative of the community at large?

4. **Early Warning Systems:**  How have local populations in the past forewarned disasters and emergencies?  Do women and men have different early warning systems based on their productive roles?  To what degree are indigenous early warning systems built upon?  Is the information that triggers early warning sufficiently disaggregated by social group?  Is the medium widely available, democratic (i.e. radio vs. walky talky) and appropriate (easy to understand, targeting and timing) to ensure that the most vulnerable are being reached?

5. **Contingency Planning:** Do contingencies demonstrate a full understanding of the different needs of women and men, boys and girls and the elderly in the event of a disaster?  Have these groups been consulted and are they part of the planning process?  Do relief stockpiles such as food, shelter and medical supplies meet the disaggregated needs of the population?  Does the relief process being planned appropriately build on, rather than undermine local capacities and skills and involve both affected women and men, boy and girl youth leaders and the elderly, rather than being treated as invisible or as victims?

6. **Public Education/Information:** Do public information and education campaigns about disasters respond to existing differences in the vulnerabilities and capacities of men and women?

7. **Exercises and Rehearsals:**  Are exercises and rehearsals targeted to include all key stakeholders such as children, youth, men and women and the elderly.  In hospitals are food staff, nurses, maintenance staff, doctors and nurses and administrative staff included?  Are the most vulnerable populations (pregnant women, handicapped, premature babies, diabetics or patients on life support apparatuses) identified and taken care of?

Source:  Adapted from Oxfam, Women and Emergencies, pp. 14-16;

## The Importance of Age and Gender ΕΓ Disaggregated Data

In 1997, a consortium of humanitarian organizations launched the Sphere project to develop a set of uniform standards that are gender-sensitive in core areas of humanitarian assistance that would improve the quality and accountability of disaster response and relief work.

Indeed, initial health assessments include among other things, the sex and age breakdown of the affected population, the average family or household size including estimates of female and child-headed households and pregnant and lactating women.  Indeed, basic gender and age disaggregated data will have an important impact on requirements in the area of water, sanitation, shelter, nutrition and food security.

The uniform standards developed by the Sphere project also goes further by outlining appropriate approaches that involve the participation of local health authorities and qualified members of the affected population including community workers and home visitors.

Accurate and reliable data is indispensable so that humanitarian assistance and reconstruct-ion projects respond more directly to the needs of the local population.  Rapid and participatory needs assessments with NGOs and the local population can triangulate data coming from more official sources.

## The Foundation for Municipal Development

**(FUNDEMUN)** in Honduras has over the past year made a conscientious effort to achieve greater gender equity in their disaster preparedness work at the municipal level.  Invitations to workshops now explicitly invite women and men participants to the workshops.  This simple strategy has increased women's participation in the workshop by 10% and increased women's involvement at the municipal level.

## Psycho-Social Impact

Many countries following hurricane Mitch, the earthquake in El Salvador and civil strife in Colombia have begun to note the differential psycho-social impact on affected populations.

For example, in Colombia millions of persons have been displaced by guerilla and para-military groups.  As men were often the key contact for guerrilla groups or the para-military, men often felt guilt for displacing their families, experienced a deep sense of loss of their social and economic role and identity that was closely tied to working the land.   Displaced women assumed new roles as social agents and economic providers to ensure the survival of their family.  Nevertheless, women also manifested psycho-social symptoms such as sadness, anxiety or irritability.

The changing roles of women and men have also resulted in increased violence and abuse of both women and children, the breakdown of families and the consequent increase in women headed households.

There is a tremendous need to systematize data, experiences and low-cost and appropriate intervention strategies that are gender-sensitive.

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## Challenges Facing the Disaster Community
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There are a multiplicity of actors involved in disaster work:  Government Ministries at the national and municipal level; civil defense; NGOs: both national and international; civil society; donors; the Church, and community-based organizations.  Indeed, integrating a gender and participatory perspective in the work of disaster means facing a number of challenges such as:

**Resistance.**   Organizations may not be ready to embrace the change that may be required to accommodate both women and men as participants and decision-makers in their communities or organizations.

**Shifting control and command structures so that they are more horizontal, team-based and inclusive of various voices.** As the saying goes, "people want change, but don't want to change".  Without a basic change of attitudes and behaviours that value listening, participation, diversity of opinion, it will be very difficult to move to more democratic structures of decision-making that value teamwork and horizontal modes of communication that are less hierarchical and vertical.

**Shedding old practices for new tools and methods.**   The current unsustainability of development interventions and inappropriate international humanitarian assistance bring a host of lost opportunities, duplication of efforts and plain waste of human and financial resources.  Governments, donors and technical assistance organizations, must define their inventions by listening to the people, hearing their needs and priorities, hearing their voices to shape interventions that come from below rather than being imposed by what outsiders think poor people need or require.   This requires strong facilitation skills and knowledge of participatory rapid assessment techniques that can be used in preparedness, mitigation and response.

**Coordinating Efforts without forgetting who are the key ACTORS of development.**  Greater donor and NGO coordination is essential and laudable.  Supporting local NGO capacity is critical when international money has dried up and gone elsewhere.  However, the local population and those most affected by disasters and emergencies must be part of this consultation process and an environment created so that their voices are heard and listened to.  They cannot be absent from discussions about them whether they be the Government, the poor, the vulnerable: youth, single heads of household or elderly or the displaced.

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## Understanding Key Concepts
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There are a number of key concepts that are critical to considering gender and participation in disaster work.

**Gender** refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities of women and men that can be seen through:
- The differential needs of women and men which may need to be met in different ways.
- The differential roles and responsibilities and capabilities of men and women which can be reinforced or undermined before, during or after disasters and emergencies.
- Social institutions and cultural practices that ensure that we learn and comply with socially accepted roles.
- The differential impact of disasters based on women and men's social economic position in society.

**Gender Equity** are the special measures that are often required to ensure that women and men can fully participate as equal partners in the sustainable development of their societies.  Latin American countries have adopted their own laws on promoting equal opportunities and

measures against domestic violence and discrimination. **Are your disaster interventions providing equal opportunities for both women and men regardless of their gender, race, sexuality or socio-economic position?**

**Gender Equality** is not simply a women's issue. Gender equality means that women and men have equal opportunities for reaching their full potential to contribute to the national, economic and social and cultural development of their country in ways that ensure sustainable development, social justice and greater equity.

**Participation**. Experience has shown that real participation can improve the quality, effect and sustainability of development actions by placing the needs, priorities and aspirations of people at the centre. However, experience has also shown that there are a myriad of definitions, interpretations, degrees and levels of participation. What seems participatory to one person may seem vertical and dictatorial to another. Undergoing some critical self-analysis on one's style of management or work is essential as well as identifying the attitudes, behaviours and skills that are necessary to be more participatory and inclusive in how projects are designed, implemented and evaluated or how disaster preparedness, mitigation and response can mobilize all the resources in ways that encourage democratic principles, team-work and inclusivity.

Learning to use participatory and rapid assessment methods might prove useful in community development work and in rapid assessments following a disaster. Exploratory walks, focus groups (men, women and children), discussions with key informants and opinion leaders (i.e. community leaders, elders, teachers, nurses, etc), community mapping, ranking of priorities are some of the many tools that can be used to triangulate your findings.
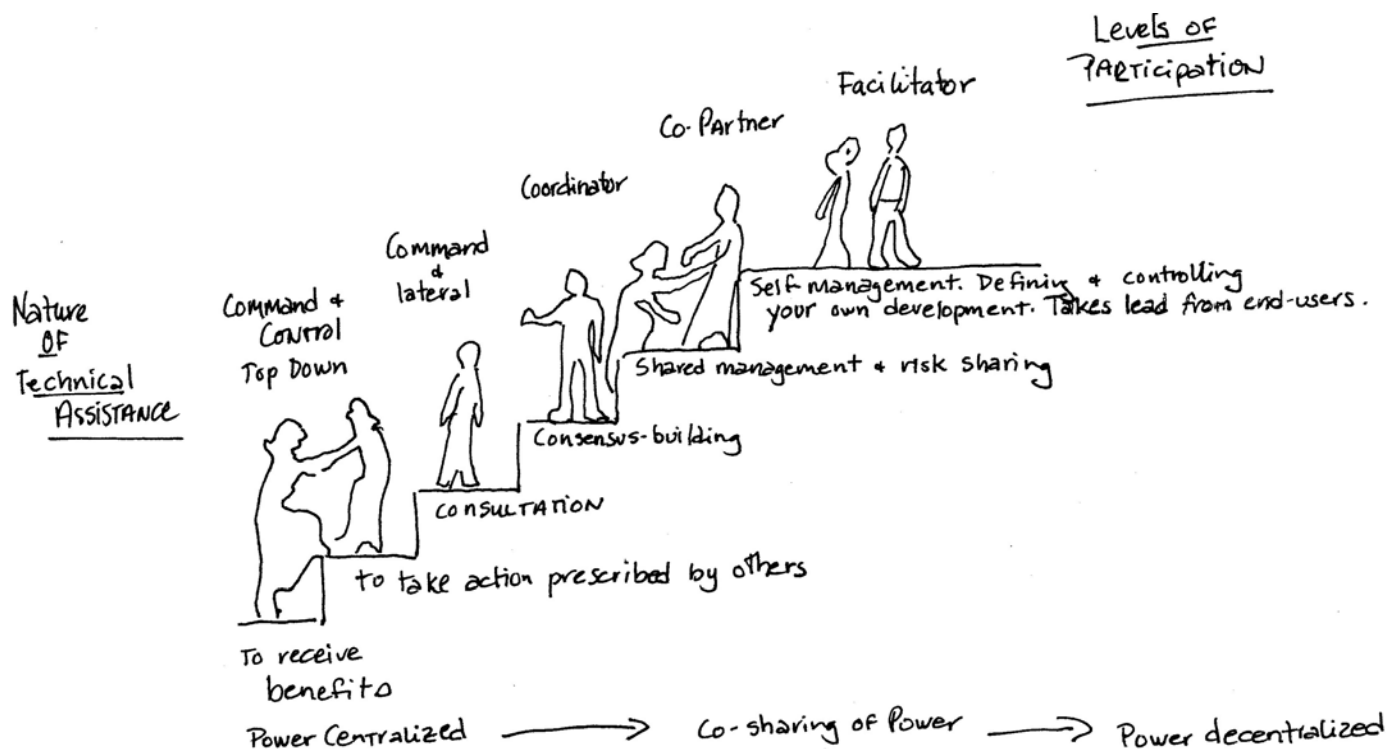


**Degrees of Participation: Where do you situate yourself on the steps of participation? Where do you situate your organization? How do others perceive you?**

# Key Web Sites & References on Gender & Participation

**Web Sites:**
Gender and Disaster Network: www.anglia.ac.uk/geography/gdn
Disaster Studies Project: www.anglia.ac.uk/geography/dsp
Radical Interpretations of Disaster: www.anglia.ac.uk/geography/radix
Weaving Gender in Disaster and Refugee Assistance.  Report and Field Checklists. www.interaction.org/pub/morepubs.html
Bridge (UK based gender and development information and analysis service: http://www.ids.ac.uk/bridge/dgb7.html
Laboratory for Social and Behaviorial Research at the International Hurricane Centre: www.fiu.edu/~lsbr.
Centre for Health and Gender Equity: http://genderhealth.org
Oxfam, gender and development: www.oxfam.org.uk/policy/gender/gender.htm
Various documents on aid and emergencies: http://www.oneworld.org
CINEP:  www.cinep.org.co
Group of humanitarian agencies have produced a set of agreed principles and minimum standards for relief.  See the Sphere project:  www.sphereproject.org.

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For more information contact:
Françoise Coupal
Director
Mosaic.net International, Inc.
705 Roosevelt Ave.
Ottawa, Canada
K2A 2A8

(613) 728-1439
(613) 728-1154

email: coupal@mosaic-net-intl.ca
Web address:  www.mosaic-net-intl.ca