



Gender Note # 4

Women, Gender & Disaster: Abilities & Disabilities

Women and girls who live with disabilities also too often live with poverty and social exclusion, compounded by a “gender neutral” approach to disability in disasters that renders them invisible. The care work of women with and without disabilities is also minimized and little is known about the factors that produce the specific disabilities of girls and women. Mobilizing the capacities, insights and life experience of women and men who live with disabilities builds stronger, more resilient families, workplaces and communities.

Disabled women and girls are of all ages, all racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and sexual orientations; they live in rural, urban and suburban communities. . . . Disabled women and girls live at the corner of disability and womanhood – with two ‘minority’ identities, a double dose of discrimination and stereotyping and multiple barriers to achieving their life goals. While many women with disabilities derive enormous strength, resilience and creativity from their multiple identities, they also face the consequences of discrimination. . . . Yet, the self-defined needs of women with disabilities remain on the margins of the social justice movements that should represent them – the women’s movement, the disability rights movement, and the civil rights movement – leaving disabled women and girls of all backgrounds essentially invisible.

Source: Girls and Young Women with Disabilities, Harilyn Rousso, 2001

A quadriplegic woman in New Orleans had been unsuccessfully trying to evacuate to the Superdome since Saturday. In my naiveté I thought a few phone calls to the “right” people would help, and I was sure I knew who to call. After many calls to the “right” people, it was clear that this woman, Benilda Caixetta, was NOT being evacuated. I stayed on the phone with Benilda for most of the day, assuring her that I was doing all I could to make sure help would be coming as soon as possible. She kept telling me she had been calling for a ride to the Superdome since Saturday, but, despite promises, no one came. The very same paratransit system that people with disabilities can’t rely on in good weather was what was being relied on in the evacuation. It’s no surprise that didn’t work. I was on the phone with her that afternoon when she told me, with panic in her voice, “the water is rushing in” and then her phone went dead. We learned five days later that she had been found in her apartment, dead, floating next to her wheelchair.

Source: The Impact Of Hurricanes Katrina And Rita On People With Disabilities: A Look Back And Remaining Challenges, National Council on Disability, 2006:



Vicki Killingsworth, incoming president of Living Independence for Everyone, a Mississippi disability-rights group, discusses her observations with a FEMA employee. FEMA News Photo/ Patsy Lynch

Challenges

- Neglect of the abilities of women in crisis who live with disabilities
- Inattention to diversity of disability communities, diversity of populations within these groups
- Gender stereotyping leading to “protective” not empowerment approach
- Minimizing of gender dimensions in disability and disaster planning
- Lack of awareness of gender-specific factors increasing risk of women who live with disability
- Minimizing of women’s overlapping or conflicting roles as caregivers to persons with disabilities
- Lack of analysis and research on gender, disability and disaster
- Historic neglect of disability issues in development sphere
- Neglect of gender dimensions of disability for women and for men in disasters

Talking Points

In a given community, more disabled women than men live with disabilities that will shape their actions to prepare for, cope with and respond to hazards and disasters. Why is this important to know?

More women than men live with physical and/or mental conditions which, in a disability-hostile environment, limit their everyday activities.

- Women live longer than men on balance so experience more of the disabilities of advanced age.
- Rates of mental illness are higher among women, e.g. depression.
- Chronic illnesses such as debilitating asthma or diabetes are higher among women, and women are the fastest growing group among young people living with HIV/AIDS.
- Women are more likely to be severely disabled by stroke due to disparate treatment.
- The late stages of pregnancy can also profoundly limit women's personal mobility, along with childbirth and its aftermath, and a World Bank report points out that 30 women every moment are injured or disabled during labor.
- Sex- and gender-based violence may leave survivors with permanent and disabling injuries.

Interacting gender dynamics magnify the effects of disability on women and reduce the services needed to live as independently as possible.

- Poverty rates are higher among women with disabilities due to employment discrimination and lack of social protection.
- Employment rates for disabled women are half that of disabled men. Disabled women must depend more heavily than men on state supported social services, to the extent these are available.
- Disabled women are subject to rates of domestic violence as much as twice that of nondisabled women.
- Social stigma compounds disability for most of the world's women. Gender norms around beauty and perfection apply especially to women and limit marriage opportunities in contexts where marriage is an essential economic relationship. Disabled sons are allowed to marry more often than disabled daughters and rates of divorce are higher among disabled women.
- Women receive just 1/5 of rehabilitative services available globally.
- 8 in 10 of the 500 million plus persons with disabilities live in the global South, where just 1% of disabled women are literate.

Disasters compound the social effects of disability, especially for girls and women who face other barriers.

- Like men, women also become disabled as a result of disaster-related injury, including inadequate reproductive care. This may seriously affect the care or income they can provide for their families and may lead to divorce or desertion.
- Women with disabilities are subject to higher rates of sexual assault and partner violence, both of which may increase post-conflict and post-disaster.
- Limitations on personal mobility due to cultural norms may deter women from successfully accessing much-needed support services or post-disaster resources for persons with disabilities.
- Disabled women are often infantilized due to stereotyping by those delivering emergency relief.
- Stereotyping may also limit disabled women's access to essential assistance, for example when their active roles as mothers and caregivers, or their economic contribution to the household are underestimated.
- Gender-blind relief systems and inattention to the needs of dependent persons make care work more complex among disabled and non-disabled caregivers.

Women who live with disabilities are also active earners, caregivers and activists in human rights campaigns.

- Women of ability/disability have organized independently (e.g. Disabled Women's Network of Canada, Disabled Women's Network and Resource Organization in Uganda) and also work in disability coalitions to raise awareness of gender issues.
- Mobility International US takes a strong disability and development position with a focus on women and promotes leadership training, economic development and global exchange among women with disabilities.
- Women-run emergency preparedness websites in North America provide a site for women to educate first responders as well as emergency planners about disability concerns and rights in disasters.
- Women disability activists are increasingly challenging disaster risk managers to consider the gendered dynamics of disaster in emergency preparedness and disaster relief and reconstruction.

Opportunities for Action



Malaysian women with disabilities gained valuable computer skills through eHomemakers with support from the Department of Women's Development and the YWCA Vocational Training Center. The 3-month course helped qualify them for home-based administrative or customer service jobs. What if Disaster Management agencies tapped into their networks to help reach isolated homeworkers living at increased risk of disaster? What if economic recovery planning included disabled SOHO representatives engaged as consultants in developing monitoring and evaluating pro-poor disaster risk reduction efforts?

Photo courtesy of www.ehomemakers.net--Helping Women Help Themselves, South East Asia's only community network that promotes working from home, teleworking and the running of SOHO businesses through the use of information and communications technology.

"What I face is a triple stigma." Mary Muthoni. She might also face death in a disaster without her strong sense of self. What if she were employed as a community risk assessment consultant and led a local Community Preparedness Circle?



Photo: Helen Blakesly/IRIN. Mary Muthoni is living with HIV and a disability

"I'm disabled, and many people in Africa see that as being a burden to society. I'm a woman, and am seen as the weaker sex, which doesn't often have a voice here. And I'm HIV positive, with all the issues that brings.

"But I'm able to fight these stigmas. I've now got knowledge about HIV and that means I have power. I've been able to change people's attitudes to my situation by talking to them about it. "People tend to assume that as a disabled person I don't have sexual desires, that I'm asexual. It shocks them that I am HIV positive. I explain to them that I still have the desires of every other human being.

"Disabled people living with HIV/AIDS face so many challenges; getting the treatment they need can be difficult. A visually impaired person, for example, needs leading by someone so, for that person, there's no anonymity or confidentiality about their status. All too often, staff talks to the person leading them and not the patient. Deaf people need a sign language interpreter, so they have no confidentiality either. Sexual abuse is a terrible reality for disabled people. They are targeted because they are the easiest prey - that's often how they become HIV positive. Poverty is a problem too; getting a job is so hard. So if some disabled person is on the streets begging, if he sees an opportunity to earn money [doing sex work] he most likely will do it. The illness is spreading within the disabled community.

One of the biggest challenges we face, though, is being excluded. We're put under the section of 'vulnerable groups' in prevention programmes and meetings. But when those groups are talked about, disabled people aren't specifically addressed. If we were, I think HIV prevalence rates would go down.

Source: December 2008 (PlusNews) Mary Muthoni speaking with IRIN/PlusNews at the 15th International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa, Dakar, Senegal.

Research Questions

- How are the safety and well-being of women and girls with disabilities affected by different kinds of disasters, in different contexts? How are gender relations affected?
- What contributions do women and men with disabilities make to hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness, response and long-term recovery? How do current relief and reconstruction projects reflect this?
- How are women living with disabilities organizing to increase safety and reduce disaster risk? What good practices can be shared between and within regions?
- How, and how well, are current disaster preparedness initiatives meeting the specific needs and long-term interests of disabled women and men?
- What post-disaster economic recovery models best serve women with disabilities? In which disability communities?

Policy Guidelines

- Partner agreements and protocols should be assessed regularly for potentially exclusionary practices, with respect both to gender and to disability and sustained focus on poverty reduction strategies that are effective for women with disabilities.
- Disability and gender experts should be consulted in program development, monitoring and evaluation, with emphasis on cross-learning from disaster, development and gender programming.
- Gender analysis of disability programming in disaster contexts should be enabled through collection/use of field data disaggregated by sex, age and disability status.
- Disaster risk reduction activities and communications should be accessible to all women and all men, with emphasis on engagement with and support for those most socially excluded on the basis of gender, disability and related dynamics.
- Leadership opportunities at all levels of government disaster bureaus and agencies should be provided for women with disabilities and local networks fully engaged.
- Good practice guidelines should be developed and/or revised to reflect an integrated and rights-based approach, bringing a gender lens to disability and disaster work, and a disability lens to gender and disaster risk reduction.

Practical Steps

- Local disaster risk reduction partnerships should be fostered with advocacy groups engaging women and men around disability rights in disasters. Good practice guides should be revised as needed.
- Women/men with disabilities should be recruited and retained in field staff and program management roles.
- Cross-training should be provided by women with disabilities for gender, development and disaster staff.
- Awareness materials, early warnings and risk communication strategies should be reviewed for potential gaps in reaching women and men equally in disability communities, and women/men with disabilities equally engaged in public education campaigns stressing potential capacities for leadership and action in crises.
- Employment-intensive programs as well as psychosocial efforts should target women and girls living with disabilities before disaster as well as those whose disabilities arise in the aftermath.

Selected Resources

- Disabilities and women: Deconstructing myths and reconstructing realities, Adrienne Asch et al., 2001, Encyclopedia of Women and Gender, Vol. 1, J. Worell (Ed.)
 - A Health Handbook for Women, 2007, Jane Maxwell, Julia Watts Belser, and Darlena David:
http://www.hesperian.org/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=HB&Product_Code=B150&Category_Code=
 - Strong Proud Sisters: Girls and Young Women with Disabilities (2001), Harilyn Rousso, 2001, Center for Women Policy Studies: <http://www.centerwomenpolicy.org/pdfs/dis3.pdf>
 - World Bank, Social Development Department, 2007, Social Analysis and Disability: A Guidance Note: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/280658-1172606907476/SAnalysisDis.pdf>
 - Women With Disabilities Fact Sheet, UN Women Watch: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/enable/>
- Women's abilities and disabilities in crisis, Elizabeth Davis et al., in Women of Katrina: The Gender Dimensions of Disaster Recovery, E. David & E. Enarson (Eds., forthcoming)

And visit the website of the Gender and Disaster Network for additional references, accounts from the field, policy & practice guides, examples of good practice, and core concepts for gendering disaster risk reduction: www.gdnonline.org