



People walk by damaged buildings in Port-au-Prince, Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake.

Responding to gender-based violence in emergencies

This guidance note looks at the causes, risks and impacts of gender-based violence during emergencies. It offers suggestions for how Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies might plan for gender-based violence in emergency response.

This resource can be used as a tool during gender training, as an information sheet for staff and volunteers, at the governance level, and as part of education or advocacy activities in National Societies.

A commitment to gender equality is an ongoing theme for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Understanding gender-based violence

Gender-based violence has been called a problem of “pandemic proportions” by UN Women.¹ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines gender-based violence as an “umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females.”² The World Health Organisation (WHO) explains that gender-based violence can include:

rape and attempted rape, marital rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, forced early marriage, domestic violence, trafficking and female genital mutilation.³

- Country data from UN Women indicates that globally, up to 70 per cent of women experience physical and/or sexual violence from men in their lifetime – mostly from partners or someone they know. Of women aged between 15 and 44, violence causes more death and disability than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.¹



A woman reads a brochure about domestic violence at the Port Vila vegetable market in Vanuatu.

- Gender-based violence is often used interchangeably with the term ‘violence against women’ and must be understood in the context of structural inequalities between men and women. Men and boys can also experience gender-based violence.² In these cases, the violence occurs in the context of ‘gendered’ abuse. Examples include: men being ‘feminised’ through rape, forced to commit rape and/or incest or made to watch the abuse of their partners and children.⁵ Those most affected by gender-based violence are disproportionately women and girls, who experience it across all sectors of the community – in conflict, peacetime, during emergencies, in their homes and in the streets.
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reflects that gender-based violence does not occur in a vacuum and is a symptom “of failed institutions, of norms that perpetuate or tolerate abuse, of dangerously skewed gender relations and entrenched inequalities.”⁴
- Gender-based violence has historically been met with silence, taboos about disclosure, a culture of victim-blaming and attitudes that normalise it.⁵

Inequality in emergencies

Emergencies (encompassing natural disasters and armed conflict) are mostly characterised by a lack of stability (even in places of refuge).⁶

- The impact of emergency situations on communities is affected by a host of factors. Humanitarian organisation DARA comments that “pre-existing political, social, and economic structures and conditions determine who lives, who dies, and how populations recover from natural disasters and armed conflict.”⁷
- During emergencies people can be suddenly displaced (sometimes as refugees) and forced to live in overcrowded settlements. There can be a breakdown of law and order, and structures that normally hold communities together (such as social networks and access to resources) are profoundly disrupted. There is a heightened sense of instability, insecurity and fear, a loss of autonomy, and dependency on others for aid.
- The stressful time of an emergency can exacerbate existing gender inequalities, resulting in increases in gender-based violence in the home and community (see table, page 3). The crisis does not cause the violence per se, but can change the severity and types of violence experienced.⁴ In these times, the people more vulnerable to violence generally (women and children) are even more at risk for abuse, assault and exploitation.⁷
- Sexual violence in particular is used as a weapon of war during conflict by soldiers and armed groups. The systematic sexual violence inflicted during the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia and in the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s offers some of the most graphic examples of this. Systematic and opportunistic sexual violence continues to be a feature of ongoing emergencies around the world.⁵

A closer look at gender-based violence in emergencies

Women, men, girls and boys have different experiences of gender-based violence during emergencies.

Women and girls

Women are at risk for sexual assault and rape during emergencies, especially if food, water or fuel sources are far from settlements or located in unsafe areas.

Women and girls are at risk for sexual exploitation in these times – including sexual bartering in exchange for essential goods and services, trafficking and sexual slavery.

Women and girls can suffer systematic sexual violence by soldiers or members of armed groups.

Violence from intimate partners and male family members can escalate during emergencies. This tends to increase as the crisis worsens, and men have lost their jobs and status – particularly in communities with traditional gender roles, and where family violence is normalised.

Women and girls are vulnerable to forced marriage during emergency situations.

Women and girls are typically more physically vulnerable and less mobile than men. They may find themselves exposed to violence as they carry out their gender-specific roles as carers, providers and labourers.

Women and girls who are unaccompanied through separation from, or abandonment by their families are very vulnerable to violence.

Due to taboos about gender-based violence and a culture of victim blaming, women and girls may experience shame, be socially ostracised, punished by family members and extremely reluctant to report crimes or seek medical attention.

Women and children often live alone in displaced persons camps, and they are very vulnerable to abuse while living in these situations.

Women and girls are at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies due to sexual assault in times of emergency. Lack of health infrastructure can mean they can't access adequate medical treatment or reproductive health options.

Men and boys

Men who are ex-combatants or non-combatants may take out their feelings of powerlessness and trauma on their partners and children through violence.

Armed forces can terrorise, humiliate and 'emasculate' men via sexual violence against their wives, children and themselves. Sexual violence against men and boys has been reported in at least 25 conflict situations.⁵

Soldiers (including child soldiers) may be forced to 'prove' their manhood by taking part in rape and sexual violence. Additionally, child soldiers (who are mostly male) are extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual violence.

Men targeted in conflict-based sexual violence report being 'feminised' by combatants – that is being made to undertake traditionally 'female roles' (care-giving, cooking and cleaning) and being raped.⁵

Men and boys who have experienced sexual violence directly during a crisis may be reticent to report assaults due to taboos (cultural norms about 'being a man' and deeply ingrained homophobia).

Male prisoners of war and labour camps are at high risk of sexual and physical violence.

Men may be forced to commit rape or incest by armed groups as part of systematic violence and terror against populations.



Making gender work

Ultimately, all efforts to address gender-based violence during emergencies must exist within broader gender mainstreaming programs and initiatives. Gender mainstreaming is a process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, in all areas and at all levels. Gender mainstreaming also looks at the different capacities and vulnerabilities of men, women, boys and girls.

Programs that include gender respond better to the different needs and experiences of men and women. They also acknowledge the issues and structures that can result in women being disadvantaged and disempowered.

Here are some suggestions for including gender-based violence considerations into your emergency response:

1) Do a gender analysis

A gender analysis looks at the ways gender shapes the roles and experiences of women, men, girls and boys. Your gender analysis should focus on the different experiences of women and men during emergencies (see the Australian Red Cross guidance note *Gender and disaster management*) and the risks and consequences of gender-based violence.

2) Respond to gender-based violence in emergencies

- Rapid assessments of health status and needs during emergencies should include sex-disaggregated data (data broken down by sex) and your gender analysis.
- Injury surveillance systems should include gender-based violence.
- Community groups, networks and programs that address gender-based violence prior to the emergency should be identified and included as part of the response (with support and strengthening if required).
- Health service delivery should include care for people who have experienced gender-based violence. Care should include at a minimum: treatment of physical injuries and sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy prevention, and where appropriate, HIV post-exposure prophylaxis.
- Health workers need to identify and support people affected by violence in both gender and culturally sensitive ways.
- Unaccompanied women and children should be registered and offered special care and protection.
- Women's safe access to resources and assistance must be ensured, and women should be included in emergency response and distribution networks.

3) Include gender and violence prevention in recovery

- Women and girls can often be left out of considerations during the post-emergency period even though they are actively involved in many tasks of rebuilding. The post-emergency period should be seen as an opportunity to include the perspectives of those traditionally excluded from decision-making in order to progress security and development agendas (including the Millennium Development Goals).
- Programs to prevent violence should be implemented using pragmatic, evidence-based, community owned and comprehensive approaches.
- Engaging women in planning recovery programs allows for more appropriate and responsive assistance.
- Link program planning to the known gender roles in the community – for example if women traditionally collect water, ensure they are closely involved in planning any new water points/distribution arrangements.



This woman and her children wait in a Manila evacuation centre following floods that submerged more than 60 percent of the Philippines capital.

Management and training

Responsibilities

It is the program coordinator and/or the team leader's responsibility to report on and plan for gender-sensitive strategies and develop an understanding of gender-based violence. Gender mainstreaming responsibilities should be included in the position descriptions of all team members.

Tools

Develop easy-to-use and relevant tools to support staff and volunteers. Adapt and use existing tools, and ensure information collection tools and reporting formats are always gender sensitive.

Training

Develop culturally appropriate gender training programs for staff and local communities. Use the IFRC *Training Pack on Gender Issues* and other suitable tools (see Resources, page 7).

Ensure community-based emergency preparedness projects – such as disaster training and education programs – include both women and men and address their different needs and concerns.

Consider using an experienced gender trainer to help develop a tailored program and/or to modify existing materials.

Reporting

Make information collection tools and reporting formats gender sensitive. Gender disaggregated data should be collected and incorporated into all phases of a disaster management program, from the initial vulnerability and capacity assessment to planning, implementation and evaluation.

Recruitment

Recruit men and women as staff and volunteers. Gender sensitive recruitment should be part of an overall strategy – not only to ensure

gender balance – but also so that all new staff and volunteers have an understanding of, and sensitivity to, gender issues and gender-based violence. This may involve holding community forums to explain why both men and women are needed for programs, and recruiting in alternative ways, i.e. hiring people without literacy skills (in some communities these are typically women) if the role doesn't require literacy.



This Pakistani family sit in front of the remains of their house after severe floods.

References and further reading

1. UN Women (2011), 'Facts and figures on violence against women', at: http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures.html
2. IASC (2005), *Guidelines for gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian settings*, Geneva
3. WHO (2013), 'Sexual and other forms of gender-based violence in crises', at: <http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/pht/SGBV/en/index.html>
4. UNFPA (2010), *State of the world population 2010: from conflict and crisis to renewal*, New York, at: <http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/6801>
5. Men Engage/UNFPA (2012), *Sexual violence in conflict and post conflict: engaging men and boys*
6. WHO (2007), *Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies*
7. DARA (2011), *The Humanitarian Response Index 2011: addressing the gender challenge*, Madrid
8. Canadian Red Cross (2012), *Predictable, preventable: best practices for addressing interpersonal and self-directed violence during and after disasters*
9. IFRC, *Gender Policy*, at: <http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Governance/Policies/gender-policy-en.pdf>

Resources

Australian Red Cross, *Gender and disaster management*

Australian Red Cross, *Gender and HIV*

Australian Red Cross, *Gender and shelter*

Australian Red Cross, *Gender and water and sanitation*

To download, please visit: <http://www.redcross.org.au/gender-briefing-papers.aspx>

IFRC, *Training Pack on Gender Issues*

For a copy, please contact Australian Red Cross

