



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San José, Costa Rica

RESILIENCE AND RISK MANAGEMENT



Photo by Sidney Velado, USAID/OFDA

A woman stands among rice crops planted through a USAID/OFDA-funded livelihoods restoration project in Nicaragua. Women play an integral role in the health and function of society, before and after disasters strike.

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 empow-

erment-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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Women in El Salvador stand in line to receive kitchen and hygiene supplies as part of the USAID/OFDA response to the 2011 flooding associated with Tropical Depression 12-E and subsequent heavy rains.



Photo by Francisco Linares, USAID/OFDA

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

USAID/OFDA Country Visits Provide Insight for Improvement

In July, USAID/OFDA staff from the LAC regional office and Washington, D.C., headquarters conducted visits in Chile, Guatemala, and Jamaica to assess gender issues in disaster management, including successes, gaps, and challenges. The visits allowed USAID/OFDA to gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding gender and disasters in LAC and strengthen programming in the region.

Each visit covered one LAC sub-region and included a focus group composed of organizations working on gender themes and/or disaster issues who discussed the progress and challenges of integrating gender-sensitive programming into disaster work. The team also met with partners implementing large and small projects funded by USAID/OFDA, as well as GROOTS International, a key organization working in Jamaica and Guatemala -- and a principal member of the Huairou Commission -- to share and analyze experiences.

Noteworthy findings include the need to foster stronger relationships between national disaster organizations and gender-oriented civil society groups; expand related networks and communities of practice to better connect people and information, particularly in rural settings; and provide greater support for grassroots organizations, since many of these groups have developed extremely relevant and effective strategies to increase preparedness, response, and recovery potential in communities.

Additional conclusions point to the need to encourage greater involvement of academia in gender and disaster work, particularly universities already connected to disaster risk management activities, and provide support to local non-governmental organizations to better develop and integrate gender components into training materials and workshops.

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Reading Between the Lines: USAID/OFDA's Improves Courses

As part of USAID/OFDA's mission to address gender inequality and maximize the benefits of integrating women and marginalized populations into disaster work, the USAID/OFDA team, through its Regional Disaster Assistance Program, is working to eliminate all forms of discrimination and sexual or gender-based stereotypes from its 20-course training portfolio.

The new-and-improved courses include exercises to identify discriminatory practices as well as tools to tap into the diversity of populations for better disaster preparedness and more effective responses.

Gender in Disaster Work

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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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DISASTER PREPAREDNESS



Photo by Aurliana 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.

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.