



'In Sri Lanka men handed out underwear and commented on the size'

It is time to think through not just the impact of humanitarian crises on women but also the impact of humanitarian response

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In recent years the world has seen an increase in the number of displaced men, women and children as a result of conflict and natural disasters. Disaster responses are rarely gender sensitive despite various studies, which show that women tend to be more affected during a crisis or conflict. Their traditional gender roles make them more vulnerable to these disasters. This impact multiplies in culturally sensitive communities where mobility of women is restricted due to religious customs, such as the purdah system observed in many Muslim communities.

Though efforts are being made by various humanitarian organisations to ensure that gender is understood, in recent emergencies it has been observed that gender sensitivity still remains a challenge. This might be because logistics and supply chain management, which spearheads the procurement and management of humanitarian goods and services, remains male dominated, which affects the ability of humanitarian organisations to meet the specific needs of women and address their concerns.

An example of this impact was seen in the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. In its guidelines for gender sensitive disaster management, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) shared a case study from Sri Lanka which showed that after the 2004 tsunami "the distribution of underwear, bras and panties was carried out publicly, with embarrassing comments about which sizes were appropriate for which women." In addition, distribution of sanitary products was under the control of male camp officials who handed them out one at a time, so women had to go back and ask again and again. Again the size of the sanitary cloth, quality and colour was not understandable for procurement teams comprising men.

In addition, the cluster system, initiated by the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), also doesn't understand the different needs of men and women when it comes to their international standards of non-food items and health and hygiene kits.

But the problems that are caused by lack of gender sensitivity are not unique to this area so why the focus on logistics and supply chain?

Humanitarian programmes need a diverse workforce that understand the varying needs of the individuals they are supposed to serve. Unless there is an increase in the number of women in logistics and supply chain management, humanitarian actors will continue to promote a model, which is not empathetic towards the needs and concerns of female beneficiaries. An increase in number of women in procurement and logistic teams - and the training of men on these teams - is not the only solution, but what it ensures is gender sensitivity at what is already a difficult time.

It is important to acknowledge that the needs and aspirations of displaced women and girls will not be fully addressed by just having more women in logistics and supply chains alone. It also requires humanitarian organisations to understand the effect that gender inequalities have on the impact of their programmes. Understanding and addressing gender inequalities in the humanitarian sector does not only require committed organisations but also committed individuals to address gender issues.

However, making gender sensitivity central to logistics and supply also raises other questions.

How well do organisations train the staff to understand the importance of addressing gender needs? Are humanitarian organisations ready to adopt human resource policies that will encourage more women into the field, investing in training, and mentoring staff to acquire the skills they need to be gender sensitive? What are the mechanisms required for humanitarian organisations to get support on gender equality? How can logistics and supply chain management contribute to addressing the gender inequalities that exist between the women and men benefiting from the humanitarian response?

There are no easy answers to the above questions nonetheless, for women to receive effective aid gender inequality must be addressed.

There is an urgent need to work towards creating organisational cultures where gender mainstreaming is 'seen, understood, and owned' by all staff. Commitment to gender equality and a strong follow-up by senior management is a requisite to achieve the goal of gender responsive humanitarian response.

Moreover, gender sensitisation should always remain a criteria during recruitment of procurement and logistic team. Diversity research overall (whether in terms of age, disabilities, religion, race, ethnicity, minorities) has not yet been conducted from the perspective of

humanitarian logistics though addressing diversity has an eminent impact on delivery. While humanitarian organisations have for some time tried to work out the best way to deliver programmes to various minorities, and of late have also come to recognise the problem of age discrimination (and its cultural varieties), it is important now then to fully think through not just the impact of humanitarian crises on women but also the impact of humanitarian response.

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