



Gender and Disasters

Gendered expectations shape our risk, ability, and legacy. Internationally, mortality in most disasters is higher for women and children than men. More women than men inhabit risk-prone localities in inadequate housing, and through poverty, have fewer resources for adaptation to climate or escape in catastrophic disasters.

Most societies are patriarchal, where gender is the central organizing framework as evidenced by structural discrimination of men against women, for example, during pregnancy and the postnatal period including breastfeeding, in childcare arrangements, women's lower status and income, the objectification of women, and violence against women. Those with diverse gender and sexual identities, too, are frequently ignored, excluded, and vilified.

The constraints and expectations of socially-constructed binary gender roles harm people with women expected to nurture others and sacrifice their own safety and wellbeing, and men expected to be protectors and providers, stoic and courageous. Such narrow gender roles and gendered power dynamics lead to damaging effects on mental and physical health and reluctance to seek help for all.

Women and people of diverse gender and sexual identity are at increased risk of violence in disasters through the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, exacerbated power inequality and exposure in evacuation sites and recovery centres. There is a greater willingness to excuse men's violence when they present as suffering as a result of the disaster or have been cast as "heroes" in it. Disaster also disrupts services previously offered by housing, refuge, and domestic violence organizations. The limited targeted support for women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex (LGBTI) people experiencing domestic violence is exacerbated in the context of an emergency.

The lack of attention to violence against women and people of diverse gender and sexual identities in disasters and their aftermath must be addressed through first understanding the problem. Sex/gender-disaggregated data (with options for indeterminate/intersex/unspecified) will provide an informed basis on which to improve required services.

Male privilege brings costs for men as well as women. Gender norms encourage men and boys to be risk-takers, which can expose them to danger. Men are frequently reluctant to seek help after a disaster and can be isolated from support services and social networks due to culturally embedded notions of

masculine stamina. It is common for men to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism after a trauma. As a result, WADEM:

- Recognizes that disasters have differential effects on women, men, and people of diverse gender and sexual identities due to a range of factors that include discrimination, socially-constructed gender roles and expectations, and unequal access to wealth and power. Women and people of diverse gender and sexual identities are under-represented in decision making and their perspectives are under-utilized in disaster contexts.
- Supports the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* in its statement that a gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster policies and practices, and that women's leadership should be promoted and facilitated. Ideally, this would be extended to include LGBTI people.
- Urges education of disaster personnel in recognizing and acting upon gender or cultural practices which may discriminate against or endanger women and people of diverse gender and sexual identities in times of disaster.
- Recommends engaging the advice or involvement of professionals with gender expertise to improve understanding of the way gender compounds disaster experience, e.g. through women's health services, organizations to promote wellbeing of LGBTI people, or from gender units in universities. Importantly, WADEM urges the inclusion of specialist domestic violence services in all stages of disaster planning, recovery, and reconstruction.

The relevance to the WADEM mission is that through acknowledging and understanding the gendered impacts of disaster in emergency management and response, communities can prepare and rebuild more effectively, reduce violence, and ultimately save lives.

References:

1. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030
2. Sustainable Development Goals (5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)
3. UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>
4. The GEM Guidelines Literature Review provides the evidence base. (Available: UN Prevention Web or AIDR Knowledge Hub)
5. www.genderanddisaster.com.au
6. www.gdnonline.org