



# gender and shelter

*Kualsoom Bibi and her daughter in their new home, being built following the 2010 floods in Pakistan.  
Photo: IFRC / Mohammad Usman*

## Overview

This briefing paper looks at the importance of gender within Red Cross programs and services and offers some suggestions about how Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies might better integrate gender into shelter programs.

This paper 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 and advocacy activities within a Society.

## Gender: an integral part of the provision of shelter

In the aftermath of a natural disaster or conflict, the provision of emergency and transitional shelter is a crucial element of ensuring the protection, safety and security needs of the affected population are met. Women, girls, boys and men have different needs, roles and responsibilities, as well as different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate shelter. These differences must be recognized and incorporated into all aspects of a shelter program, from the initial assessment, to the design and planning stages, through to

program implementation and evaluation.

- Shelter is more than just the provision of materials or the construction of a physical structure; it is also a process essential to the creation of an environment where people can begin rebuilding their lives in safety and dignity, in both the immediate and long-term.
- Shelter protects from the elements, provides a basic sense of security, and a place for families to interact. But it is also linked to many other aspects of what is considered a normal life: privacy, independence, dignity, health and safety. Shelter is fundamental to the enjoyment of many human rights.



*Transitional houses are built in Tonga following the 2009 tsunami. Photo: Australian Red Cross/ Kathleen Walsh*

- Studies have shown that understanding differing gender needs, roles, cultural norms and capacities can assist planners in designing programs that are both feasible and targeted toward those most vulnerable, and therefore more likely to improve the lives of the affected populations.

### **Key gender issues and challenges in shelter programming**

- Shelter programs are delivered in complex and challenging environments, usually in the aftermath of a conflict or natural disaster. Meeting the immediate needs of beneficiaries and overcoming the technical and logistical challenges of delivering shelter take first priority. This can mean that adequate time and

attention is not given to comprehending and addressing gender issues.

- Basic decisions and knowledge about how a shelter is to be used, kitchen and hygiene needs are more likely to be understood by women given their role as primary caregivers in many cultures and communities. Consulting with women and allowing them to participate in the shelter process is vitally important to ensuring these needs are incorporated into the assessment and design of shelter programs.

- Unaccompanied women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and children are likely to experience significant constraints on their abilities to build shelter, making them heavily reliant on men to meet their shelter needs.

The task of physically constructing a shelter requires physical strength that people in these categories may not possess and skills they may have been excluded from being taught.

- In some cultures, women may be excluded from the task of constructing shelter due to the perception that it is 'men's work'.

- This division of labor can lead to inequitable access to shelter for women and make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In some instances, single or unaccompanied women have been forced to trade unwanted sex in exchange for male assistance in shelter construction.

- The construction of shelter may present an opportunity for women

to engage in training and learning new skills (where culturally acceptable and physically appropriate).

- It is also important to consider whether involving women in the phase of physically constructing the shelter may cause additional and unwanted burdens, as women may already be responsible for domestic work and childcare.
- It is equally important to consider men's roles. Requiring or expecting them to voluntarily take part in shelter construction may affect their ability to provide for their families if, for example, they are the sole breadwinner or main provider of food to the family through agricultural activities etc.
- Cultural and societal norms about gender can present impediments to thorough consultation and communication with the most vulnerable members of a community.
- Materials may need to be provided that allow for partition and privacy between and within families.
- In a camp or cluster, the design and location of communal facilities, particularly latrines and hygiene facilities, has a critical gender component. Poorly designed facilities, with bad lighting can greatly increase the risk of gender-based violence against women and girls. Communal facilities need to be sensitive to gender needs. Male and female toilets and showers should be separated and located in well lit areas of the camp to reduce the risk of assault.

- The establishment of a camp or settlements in a location close to



*A woman helps construct her home following the 2010 Pakistan floods.  
Photo: IFRC/Rabia Ajaib*

an international border or disputed area can expose young men and boys to criminality, recruitment to and/or exploitation by militia or paramilitary forces.

- Location of and access to essential supplies – such as water and food stores – have important gender considerations. If women and children are required to travel long distances to access water

and food, they may be exposed to increased risk of violence or abuse.

- The absence of private and public spaces dedicated specifically for women and children has been a source of harassment in some cultures where women are culturally not permitted to be seen or to be active in public.

## A closer look at gender and shelter

Understanding the different vulnerabilities, needs and roles of women, girls, boys and men is essential to the success of shelter programs.

| Women's roles and needs  | Men's roles and needs   |
|--|---|
| In the aftermath of a disaster, women – particularly the unaccompanied, elderly and young – and people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable.  | Young men and boys can be vulnerable to being co-opted into violence and crime, particularly in a camp situation.   |
| As women often tend to be the primary caregivers, with responsibilities for running the household, cleaning, preparing meals and childcare, they are likely to be the primary users of the constructed shelter and more aware of specific needs the shelter should meet. | Men are disproportionately likely to die or be seriously injured in a crisis, limiting capacities to construct shelter.   |
| Unaccompanied women and the elderly, and people with disabilities often have reduced access to shelter due to established gender hierarchies or cultural norms prohibiting communication.  | Men may experience psycho-social pressures to provide for their families.   |
| Women's reproductive and hygiene needs and the cultural sensitivity of these subjects in some contexts may require access to privacy and health facilities.  | Men are more likely and often expected to be involved in the physical construction of shelter, placing additional burdens and responsibilities.   |
| In a camp or cluster environment, the location and layout of a camp can impact significantly on the safety and security of women and girls.  | The construction of shelter may provide employment opportunities for men where a disaster may have disrupted previously livelihoods.  |
| Women may be excluded from the construction of shelter due to physical restrictions or due to the perception that it is 'men's work.'  | Elderly men may experience difficulty in gaining access to shelter.   |
| Women should not be required to share shelter with men who are not members of their immediate family.  | The expectation that men should supply voluntary labour for shelter construction may impact on their ability to provide for their family and fulfill their role as the primary breadwinner or provider of food through agricultural activities etc. |
| Single women may require separate, private and safe shelter.   |   |



*Tents are used as temporary shelter in Banda Aceh. Photo: IFRC/Olav Saltbones*



*Shelter construction may provide an opportunity for people to learn new skills.  
Photo: Australian Red Cross/Mario Jonny dos Santos*

## **Making gender work**

Here are some suggestions for incorporating gender into the planning and implementation of shelter programs.

- Consult both men and women during the assessment and planning phase to ensure their privacy and safety needs are incorporated into the shelter program.
- Programs need to be designed to ensure equal access to shelter and that women are not fully reliant on men to fulfill their shelter needs.
- Ensure confidential access to health care facilities for women needing support for specific

hygiene needs and/or treatment for sexual violence.

- Consider the proximity of the shelter to vital resources such as fuel, water, food and sources of livelihood/employment..
- Shelter construction may provide an opportunity for some women and men to learn new skills. Although shelter construction is often voluntary, if payment is made for any services, men and women must be compensated equally.
- Shelter clusters or camps should be located away from borders or zones of conflict where possible. The layout of the camp should include separate latrine and shower facilities for men and women, appropriate lighting and security.

- In a camp environment, designate clearly defined communal spaces for women and where children can play safely under the supervision of their parents or guardians.

## **Planning and assessment**

- Recruit people with a sound understanding of gender issues and cultural sensitivities for planning and assessment teams.
- Ensure that both men and women are represented on the assessment team. This can help to overcome cultural gender norms that may prevent or limit communication between men and women.
- Assess and analyse the shelter and settlement needs of the affected population in



*An internally displaced persons camp in Port-au-Prince. Photo: IFRC/Talia Frenkel*

consultation with the relevant authorities and the populations themselves. Collecting appropriate information is crucial to providing better shelter assistance and protection for the most vulnerable people.

- Where culturally appropriate, men and women should be interviewed separately.
- Data collected during the assessment should always be disaggregated by sex and age to improve the comprehensiveness of the analysis and ensure that programs are targeted toward the needs of the most vulnerable.
- Plan access to water and sanitation services, health facilities, schools and places for recreation and worship.
- Regularly review programs to ensure that different gender needs are being met and be prepared to make necessary changes to ensure that they are.

### Key questions assessment team leaders should consider

- What are the demographics of the target group? i.e. the number of households, their gender composition, the number of single men and women, the number of male and female unaccompanied children, number of people with disabilities, the number of chronically ill. All of this data should be disaggregated by sex and age.
- What are the specific needs of women, girls, boys and men? What do they do in the shelter environment? What are their roles and needs with regard to kitchen and hygiene facilities, privacy, safety and employment?
- Is there equal consultation with men and women?
- How are shelter materials being distributed and allocated? Are there adequate strategies in

place to ensure equitable access?

- What are the different skills and abilities of men and women and how can they be best utilized? Does this reflect social hierarchy and the division of labour, familial relations and/or physical abilities?
- Are there particular cultural practices that might negatively affect (i.e. increase the vulnerability of) one particular group? For instance, cultural or religious norms that prohibits single or unaccompanied women from talking with other men.

### Program coordination

When designing and implementing shelter programs, it is important to maintain communication and close coordination with other areas, such as water, sanitation and community health programs to ensure more effective humanitarian or development interventions.

## Management and training

### Responsibilities

It is the program coordinator and/or the team leader's responsibility to report on and plan gender sensitive strategies. Gender 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 from web and ensure information collection tools and reporting formats are always gender sensitive.

### Reporting

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

### Training

Develop a separate training program on gender and integrate gender across all training programs.

Use the Federation CD Rom *Training Pack on Gender Issues* and other suitable tools (Australian Red Cross International Program has these resources).

Sometimes it can be useful to use an experienced gender trainer to help develop a tailored training program and/or to modify existing materials.



*Both men and women should be recruited as staff and volunteers.  
Photo: IFRC/Jakob Dall*

### Recruitment

Recruit both 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 staff and volunteers have an understanding of, and sensitivity to, gender issues.

This may involve undertaking community forums to explain why both men and women are needed for programs, and recruiting in alternative ways, (e.g. hiring people without literacy skills – in some communities this is most often women – if the role doesn't require literacy, or engaging husband and wife or brother and sisters on assessment teams).

## Further reading

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (ISAC), *Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities*, Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action, December 2006, available at [www.humanitarianinfo.org.au/iasc/gender](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org.au/iasc/gender)

ISAC, *Guidelines for Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies*, September 2005. See particularly Chapter 7, “Shelter, Site Planning and Non-Food Items”, available at [www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-tf\\_gender-default](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-tf_gender-default)

ISAC Gender Marker for Shelter and Non-Food Items ((NFIs), available at <http://onerresponse.info/crosscutting/gender/Pages/The%20IASC%20Gender%20Marker.aspx>

The Sphere Project, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, 2011, available at [www.projectsphere.org](http://www.projectsphere.org)

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (IFRC), *Gender Policy*, available at [www.ifrc.org/global/governance/policies/gender-policy-en.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/global/governance/policies/gender-policy-en.pdf)

## Web sites

There are considerable resources available online. Here are some useful websites  
[www.projectsphere.org](http://www.projectsphere.org)  
[www.sheltercentre.org](http://www.sheltercentre.org)  
[www.onerresponse.info](http://www.onerresponse.info)  
[www.humanitarianinfo.org.au](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org.au)