



Gender Note # 5

## Women, Gender & Disaster Risk Communication



Disaster risk communication and warnings miss the mark if overly-general and not informed by gender-aware risk assessments and community-driven preparedness. Disaster communication must be creative, sensitive to culture and context, and also gender-targeted, based on knowledge of how particular groups of women and men create, receive, interpret and exchange knowledge about hazards and disasters. Women must speak for themselves and be heard.

Taking the time and trouble to talk to women and women's groups - even in a crisis situation - can not only yield insights into the larger picture but point the way to special stories that are not only interesting but significant.

Failure to tap women - including those now attempting to resume life after the disaster - as sources and resources can only impoverish media coverage and diminish our understanding of the post-tsunami scenario, as well as many other similar situations.

Adapted from Ammu Joseph, Gender, media & tsunamis

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/feb/ajo-genmedia.htm#continue>

Heat-related deaths occurred mainly among poor men in Chicago's 1995 heat wave yet mainly among poor women in Europe's 2003 heat wave, as in South Asian heat events.

What messages, through what media and based on what information might have reached those most at risk?

Images speak louder than words. Risk communicators must work closely with media professionals to ensure that the dignity and privacy of women and men are respected in disaster images and that photographs and news accounts do not reinforce unfounded gender myths.

### Challenges

- Gender stereotyping, e.g. targeting men as earners with warnings and forecasts and women about home preparedness
- Over-reliance on sophisticated communications systems that fail to reach specific social groups at high risk
- Overly general risk messaging not reflecting the cultural, age or gender realities of everyday life
- Culturally-sensitive risk communication that fails to account for culturally-specific gender roles
- Dominance of literacy- and Internet-based communication strategies
- Lack of monitoring and evaluation to ensure gender-responsive communication content and media
- Neglect of gendered barriers to knowledge exchange, and women's capacity to apply the knowledge conveyed
- Lack of engagement of women's networks in developing, trialing, promoting & evaluating warnings & awareness systems

# Talking Points

Women's and men's daily lives revolve around social networks, roles and relationships that make a difference to disaster risk communicators.

- The gender-based division of labor positions women and men, boys and girls, differently in the production process where they have (and need) different information to protect themselves. Work-related networks are also important, and different, communication channels for women and men.
- Women's broad and dense social networks come into play significantly when vital information must be understood, shared and acted upon. Women are powerful communicators often consulted by others to assess the credibility of received information and its source. They are also the source of important practice-based knowledge that may be necessary to mitigate hazards and adapt to changing environments. Senior women especially carry important cultural knowledge and historical memory about risk management, adaptation and survival skills
- While timely information about reproductive health in emergencies is needed by all, women of child-bearing age and pregnant women have specific needs for accurate information about hazards and risks, recommended actions and available resources.
- Men's more tenuous and changing social connections with family and kin may put them 'out of the loop,' though men are often family decision-makers to whom disaster risk communications are addressed. Technical and professional skills and wide occupational associations make many men powerful risk communicators.
- Popular culture creates and reflects gender differences in the media used by women and men, e.g. women may be reached through women-produced radio programming and/or telenovellas and men through TV and/or sports-oriented campaigns,

Men's higher tolerance of risk calls for male-focused communication and awareness strategies.

- Gender norms shaping risk perception and risk tolerance may be a barrier to potentially life-saving information for boys, male youth and adult men about hazards to which they are especially exposed.
- Specifically male-oriented risk messages using men's social networks and media popular with men are rare.
- Gender stereotyping deprives boys and men of needed information, e.g. about their risk of gender-based violence.

Gender-based and cultural barriers limit women's access to vital information.

- The "digital divide" in access to and control over computers and the Internet is still a barrier to reaching women in many parts of the world. Men also often control use of the family radio or television.
- Gender norms, work demands, or safety concerns limit the ability of many women to participate meaningfully in public meetings where risk information may be conveyed. Without support, women with heavy work and family responsibilities are generally less able to inform themselves or to participate in community-based communication campaigns of proven utility.
- Gender differences are evident in women's and men's uses of preferred and trusted media. To reach high-risk groups of women, accurate information is needed about how effectively risk communication campaigns reach women when based on different media, e.g. the radio, newspapers, poster campaigns, websites, games, radio, street theatre. A generic campaign may not reach those whose safety, livelihood and health are most at risk.
- Gender stereotyping can lead risk communicators to assume that women in the family receive information from men as household heads. Risk communicators needing specific knowledge about gender and communication can partner with local women's networks to become more informed in particular cultural and hazard contexts.

Communicating with women can increase family and community resilience.

- More often than men, women report that they find government or official communications credible. They are less likely to "tune out" emergency messages and more likely to strive to act proactively, though they may lack the needed resources or face resistance.
- Women's family roles and the large role they play in primary schools position them as vital role models for two-way risk communication that leads to effective action.
- Women-run radio stations, self-help groups, unions and cooperatives, school newsletters, and women's centers are under-utilized avenues of communication in disaster risk reduction though these may be vital support systems for women.

# Opportunities for Action



Save the Children's gender targeted communication strategy made a difference in two Cuban communities. First, gender norms were identified that undermined safety: male bravado leading to drowning deaths in floodwaters; and women's lack of knowledge about the effects of earthquakes on the home and how to mitigate these. Men 18-40 years and housewives were targeted using posters, leaflets, radio spot, t-shirts, caps etc. After the campaign, 78% of the housewives targeted reported knowing positive practices during earthquakes and 85% of targeted men changed their attitude about swimming through flooded rivers.

Source: Ana Maria Bejar , WCDR Kobe 2005 presentation: <http://undisdr.org/wcdr/thematic-sessions/presentations/session3-4/stc-cuba.pdf>



Now for the local news. There is a flood watch in effect for areas surrounding the Maha rivers. Heavy rains in the last few days have caused water levels to rise and there are plans to evacuate some residents...(fades out). Sela: I thought this rain was unusually heavy. Iman : What can we do? We have no disaster plan, nobody to help us. Ashanti: We may not have help from outside, Iman, but we have this group - our radio club. And I feel that, as an organization, we are strong. We've been working together for many years. Surely we can use that strength somehow. Sela: My brother belongs to a sports club. During the drought a few years ago, the members of the sports club organized themselves to distribute emergency food supplies. The work of that sports club probably saved many lives. Ashanti: Let's think about the strengths that our radio club has. What skills do we have? Sela: Remember the seed saving project? And the weaving project for village women. Ashanti: Yes, we know we can organize. Sela: We can use our personal contacts at the radio station to get information out.

Source: Text and photo from Farm Radio International: <http://www.farmradio.org/english/partners/scripts-voices.asp>

Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) used their networks after Hurricane Stan hit Guatemala to raise funds and increase awareness among women about "natural" disasters. Women to Women with Affected Communities began on October 13, 2005, International Day for the Reduction of Natural Disasters, with a call to " share what we have, little or much, with women who suffer from the devastation caused by natural disasters." Organizers hoped to reach women in other regions affected by conflict and disaster.

For more information: [http://www.radiofeminista.net/oct05/camp\\_guate/carta-ing.htm](http://www.radiofeminista.net/oct05/camp_guate/carta-ing.htm) ; Photo credit to FIRE: <http://www.fire.or.cr/racismo01/Chimeneafenfotos1.htm>





## Research Questions

What have women in this area learned about hazards and disasters? How do they share it?  
What media are preferred and used by women/men in this area? Who controls or utilizes these?  
What barriers exist here to those at especially high risk and what do they most need to know?  
How, and how well, do early warning systems and awareness campaigns reach at-risk women and/or men?  
What new models of gender-targeted communication best reach high-risk women and men?

## Policy Guidelines

Include gender outreach and inclusivity in monitoring and evaluation of risk communication systems  
Prioritize the use of nontraditional communication media, especially women-operated and community-based media  
Utilize gender-budgeting in risk communication programs to track outreach and benefits  
Relate all risk communications to specific cultural groups based on sex- and age-specific data in risk assessments  
Consult gender and communication experts in designing awareness campaigns  
Promote gender awareness among local media professionals through networking and resource exchange

## Practical Steps

Identify and support local women and men as community risk educators  
Develop or strengthen capacity in local women's and community groups to capture & share indigenous knowledge  
Identify and consult with local women from different social locations and language groups to trial risk messaging  
Partner with local women's/men's groups to trial gender-targeted messages  
Materially support local women's community radio stations, street theatre groups & related activities  
Support gender awareness through in-house trainings for local media representatives

## Selected Resources

■ ISDR Good Practice document on gender and climate change adaptation: [http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about\\_isdr/isdr-publications/17-Gender\\_Perspectives\\_Integrating\\_DRR\\_CC/Gender\\_Perspectives\\_Integrating\\_DRR\\_CC\\_Good%20Practices.pdf](http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about_isdr/isdr-publications/17-Gender_Perspectives_Integrating_DRR_CC/Gender_Perspectives_Integrating_DRR_CC_Good%20Practices.pdf) ■ ISDR Good Practice document on gender and disaster risk reduction: [http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about\\_isdr/isdr-publications/09-gender-good-practices/gender-good-practices.pdf](http://www.unisdr.org/eng/about_isdr/isdr-publications/09-gender-good-practices/gender-good-practices.pdf) ■ Challenging Boundaries: A gender perspective on early warning in disaster and environmental management, Maureen Fordham: [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/env\\_manage/documents/EP5-2001Oct26.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/env_manage/documents/EP5-2001Oct26.pdf) ■ Gender differentiation and aftershock warning response, P. O'Brien and P. Atchison in E. Enarson and B. H. Morrow (eds.) The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes, 1998. ■ Gender differences in risk and communication behavior: responses to the New Madrid earthquake prediction, by A. M. Major, International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters 17 (3), 1999. ■ Gender, race, and perceived risk: the 'white male' effect, by M. Finucane et al., Health, Risk & Society 2 (2), 2000.

All photos used with permission. First page photo credit: World Conference on Disaster Reduction, Kobe 2005, presentation by Margarita Villalobos on Radio soap opera as a gender balanced tool in raising awareness on disaster risk reduction at the community level: <http://www.unisdr.org/wcdr/thematic-sessions/presentations/session3-4/radionovela.pdf>

And visit the website of the Gender and Disaster Network for additional references, accounts from the field, policy & practice guides, examples of good practice, and core concepts for gendering disaster risk reduction: [www.gdnonline.org](http://www.gdnonline.org)

E. Enarson for the GDN, October 2009