

The key role of rural women in building resilience to disasters: FAO's approach

By Mona S. Chaya

The vast majority of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition rely on agriculture for their livelihood¹. Agriculture-based livelihoods are more susceptible to shocks because they depend heavily on natural resources (land, water, plants, animals), and depend on human labour.

When a disaster strikes, affected farming families often lose all their productive assets, leaving them unable to continue providing for themselves and leaving them totally dependent on external assistance for food, shelter and other essentials.

FAO's role in a disaster is to help build the resilience of farming families and communities. This means trying to prevent these shocks when possible and, if they occur, try to mitigate their impact, and rebuild people's livelihoods.

Gender differences can make women more vulnerable than men to natural disasters, conflicts, and other crises because they usually have less access to productive assets, e.g., land².

For that reason, FAO completed a baseline assessment (November 2009) to review the gender implications of Disaster Risk

¹ FAO, WFP and IFAD. 2012. The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012. Economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to accelerate reduction of hunger and malnutrition. Rome, FAO.
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e.pdf>

² FAO (2011). Gender and Disaster Risk Management in FAO. Promoting gender equality in preparing for and responding to food and agriculture crises and threats. Rome.

Management (DRM) interventions and to develop key recommendations to more effectively and systematically include gender analysis and considerations in the design and implementation of FAO DRM projects³.

Gender and age are main factors affecting vulnerabilities to emergency situations. Men for example account for the majority of casualties of war, while women are more likely to be assaulted or abused, and the elderly and children suffer from malnutrition and / or exploitation.

In wartime, women and children suffer more than men from displacement, reduced access to health services, loss of livelihoods, lack of access to humanitarian assistance, including potable water, sanitation and shelter. Sexual abuse and rape of women is unfortunately common among women displaced by natural disasters or conflicts. Women also endure property loss and other abuses to their rights⁴.

Women are up to 14 times more likely than men to die from natural disasters⁵. Globally for

³ FAO (2013). Gender and Disaster Risk Management in Food and Agriculture: lessons learnt from FAO projects in Niger, Afghanistan and Indonesia. Rome.
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am035e/am035e03.pdf>

⁴ World Bank/FAO/IFAD (2009). Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook : "Gender and Crises: Implications for Agriculture",
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENAGRLIVS/OUBOOK/Resources/Module11.pdf>

⁵ Neumayer, E. and T. Plumper (2007). The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: the Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981-2002. In Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 97 (3); and Peterson K.

every one man, there are 3 to 4 women who die in a flood⁶. Physical and biological differences render women more vulnerable. In fact those differences can disadvantage their initial response to natural hazards. In addition, social norms and roles affect the way they react to a disaster, and an inequitable distribution of aid and resources due to social hierarchies have an adverse effect on women⁷.

Women comprise 43 percent of the agricultural labour force on average in developing countries⁸. However, women earn less than men largely due to less access to resources, land, technology, services, etc.

Also, a number of countries have seen substantial increases in the female share of the agricultural labour force in recent decades due to a number of reasons, including conflict, HIV/AIDS and migration. For example, in Bangladesh, women now exceed 50 percent of the agricultural labour force. In Pakistan, it has almost tripled since 1980, to 30 percent⁹.

The roles of men and women in agriculture are different, depending on country or region. In general, men own land as well as large animals, such as cattle. On the other hand, women have smaller animals, such as chickens and small ruminants, they are involved in vegetable

(2011). Reaching out to Women when Disaster Strikes. Philadelphia: Soroptimist International of the Americas.

⁶ Ferris Elizabeth (2008). Displacement, Natural Disasters and Human Rights.

http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2008/1017_natural_disasters_ferris.aspx

⁷ Ibid. (2007).

⁸ FAO (2011). The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture. - Closing the gender gap for development. Rome.

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

⁹ Ibid. FAO (2011).

production, and go to the market to sell the families agricultural production.

Women are key to agriculture and to food and nutrition security almost everywhere. Their influence on the livelihoods and nutrition and health of their households is huge. Normally, women care for children; they prepare meals and make nutritional decisions. They would usually spend on health care and education of their children with additional money. These are basic decisions within a household with serious impact on the well-being of a family.

Nevertheless, across countries and contexts, women are more affected by poverty, hunger and malnutrition. The reason is again highly due to the fact that they have less access to resources, services and opportunities, including land, livestock, labour, education, extension services, financial services and technology during peace times.

According to FAO, women represent fewer than 5 percent of all agricultural holders in the countries in North Africa and West Asia. The sub-Saharan African average of 15 percent masks wide variations. In addition to being more likely to hold land, men also typically control larger land holdings than women¹⁰.

Gender differences in education are significant and widespread. Female heads have less education than their male counterparts in all countries investigated by FAO¹¹. Gender gaps exist also for a wide range of agricultural technologies, including machines and tools, improved plant varieties, fertilizers, etc. In Burkina Faso, women use less fertilizer per hectare than men; in Guatemala, 34 percent of male-headed households use mechanical

¹⁰ Ibid. FAO (2011).

¹¹ Ibid. FAO (2011).

equipment, which is more than double the percentage of female-headed households who use modern farming equipment¹².

Evidence shows also that credit markets are not gender-neutral. Legal barriers and cultural norms sometimes impede women to hold bank accounts or enter into financial contracts in their own right. For example, in Guatemala, Indonesia, Madagascar, and Malawi, and other countries, rural female-headed households are less likely than male-headed households to use credit¹³.

In crises times, these inequalities have worse implications and put women in an extremely volatile and vulnerable position.

FAO estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they would:

- increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent
- raise the total agricultural production in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent.

This could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 percent¹⁴.

How is FAO working to build resilience through women?

In most of its resilience building interventions, FAO uses a gender-sensitive approach. Also, many of FAO's resilience interventions target women only. Two examples from Chad and Afghanistan are presented below, in which FAO demonstrates that empowering women through well-designed projects would enhance

¹² Ibid. FAO (2011).

¹⁴ Ibid. FAO (2011).

¹⁴ Ibid. FAO (2011).

the livelihoods and food and nutrition security of farming families.

The women of Kanem

The women of **Kanem in Chad**¹⁵ gave a good example in building their livelihood. Kanem, a region in western Chad, has higher rates of chronic malnutrition than the rest of the country. This region is particularly affected by disasters, most notably chronic drought.

Food insecurity, mainly affecting women and children, results from the low availability of food due to low agricultural production owing to adverse weather conditions. Food insecurity is also due to decreased incomes leading to limited access to food.

FAO has been working with vulnerable populations in the region since 2010, to help reduce the prevalence of malnutrition. The poorest rural families that rely on agriculture have limited access to fertile irrigated land (in the "ouaddis"), and cannot cultivate vegetables which require more irrigation water than other crops and which are essential for a nutritious diet.

To establish support for gardening activities, and for small irrigation projects and education on nutrition, FAO brought together landowners and farmers without access to irrigable land in the ouaddis.

Land-loan agreements, lasting five years, were signed between lenders and the poorest user-groups.

¹⁵ FAO (2013). Women of Kanem taking the lead in agricultural development. Rome.
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i2940e/i2940e13.pdf>;



Figure 1- Women access irrigable and fertile land in the ouaddis and farm it in their own names. Credits: ©FAO/Sia Kambou

The project has enabled women’s groups in the region, where women have rarely been able to access agricultural land, to access irrigable and fertile land and farm it in their own name. They were also trained on good agricultural practices.

The gardening activities implemented in the *ouaddis* have significantly increased food production for household consumption.

Poultry projects enhance lives of Afghan women

In **Afghanistan**, backyard poultry production is a major contributor to family nutrition and women have responsibility for more than 90 percent of village production of eggs and poultry meat.



Figure 2 - FAO poultry project beneficiaries. Credits: © FAO

Two FAO poultry training projects – aimed at introducing production systems for small-scale

family-managed poultry – specifically targeted women. In addition to helping women improve poultry production, the projects offered an entry point for introducing women to other types of information and skills. During the three years of the first project, participants produced 106 metric tonnes of poultry meat and 21 million eggs, of which only 7.5 million were consumed by their families. This means they had plenty to sell, adding to their family income. Today, the thousands of women who participated in the projects are not only connected to their village neighbours, they are connected to markets and to suppliers through their poultry producer groups¹⁶.

Conclusion

Women are key actors to building resilience, and this is why FAO does not address women only as "victims of disasters" but mostly as agents of change by strengthening gender-specific capacities. Rural women have a strong adaptive and reactive capacity that translates into individual and community resilience when properly supported.

In addition, considering rural women’s needs, their priorities and capacities, ensure the durability and effectiveness of emergency and rehabilitation work.

A better understanding of how crises affect differently women and men leads to more effective and better designed interventions, targeting gender-differentiated vulnerabilities. Gender discrimination is a common factor of vulnerability across regions, and rural women face specific challenges and obstacles in

¹⁶For more information visit the FAO project web site: <http://www.fao.org/in-action/poultry-projects-enhance-lives-of-afghan-women/en/>

emergency situations as a consequence of the "gender gap" in agriculture.

Crises can transform gender roles. In general crises tend to exacerbate existing gender and social inequalities. However, emergency and resilience building interventions provide an opportunity to address them directly and indirectly. Building more resilient communities and households from the onset of an emergency is crucial, trying to reduce and manage the causes of disasters. Structural gender-specific vulnerabilities should be addressed and reduced whenever possible, and thus try to apply “Build Back Better” to gender inequalities as well.

FAO estimates that closing the asset gap in agriculture could lift up to 100-150 million people out of hunger¹⁷. Closing the gender gap in agriculture will improve food security of people in peace as well as in crises times.

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¹⁷ Ibid. FAO (2011).