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# What if gender became an essential, standard element of Vulnerability Assessments?

Daniel Morchain, Giorgia Prati, Frances Kelsey and Lauren Ravon

*Vulnerability Assessments (VAs) can be useful tools for providing key insights for non-government organisations and other development actors, including governments. Not only can they provide an extensive, 'landscape-wide' understanding of vulnerability and its underlying causes in a specific context, but this understanding can be jointly owned by all participants. They can thus be used for designing risk reduction and resilience-building measures, programmes, or projects that affect specific groups within a community or the landscape. Beyond that, VAs can provide a platform that promotes interaction among otherwise disconnected stakeholders, as well as the evidence and argumentation for community groups to engage in advocacy with local and municipal/district authorities. This article draws on our combined experience as development practitioners, and considers what we have learnt about the importance of integrating gender issues into VAs.*

*Las evaluaciones de vulnerabilidad (EV) pueden ser herramientas útiles para proporcionar ideas fundamentales a las ONG y a otros actores del ámbito de desarrollo, entre ellos, los gobiernos. No solo pueden brindar una comprensión abarcadora y "panorámica" de la vulnerabilidad y de sus causas subyacentes en un contexto específico, sino que posibilitan que esta comprensión sea apropiada por quienes participen en la evaluación. Por tanto, es posible que las EV sean utilizadas para diseñar medidas, programas o proyectos orientados a disminuir el riesgo y a construir la resiliencia en una comunidad o en un ámbito más grande. Asimismo, las EV pueden ser una plataforma destinada a promover la interacción entre actores que en otras circunstancias carecerían de ella, además de proporcionar la evidencia y los argumentos que los grupos comunitarios necesitan para impulsar la incidencia dirigida a autoridades locales, municipales o distritales. Apoyándose en la experiencia de los autores en el desempeño de sus funciones como operadores del desarrollo, el presente artículo examina los aprendizajes obtenidos en torno a la importancia de incorporar las cuestiones de género en las EV.*

*Les évaluations de la vulnérabilité (EV) peuvent constituer des outils utiles pour donner des aperçus clés aux ONG et autres acteurs de développement, y compris les gouvernements. Non seulement elles permettent de comprendre de manière large et « couvrant tout le paysage » la vulnérabilité et ses causes sous-jacentes dans un*

*contexte spécifique, mais cette compréhension peut appartenir conjointement à tous les participants. Elles peuvent donc être utilisées pour concevoir des mesures, des programmes ou des projets de réduction des risques et de renforcement de la résilience qui touchent certains groupes précis au sein d'une communauté ou du paysage. Par ailleurs, les EV peuvent constituer une plateforme qui favorise l'interaction entre des parties prenantes autrement coupées les unes des autres, ainsi que les données factuelles et les arguments permettant aux groupes communautaires de mener un travail de plaidoyer auprès des autorités locales et municipales/de district. Cet article se base sur notre expérience combinée de praticiens du développement pour réfléchir à ce que nous avons appris sur l'importance d'intégrer les questions de genre dans les EV.*

*Key words:* vulnerability; resilience; gender; vulnerability assessment methodologies; climate change adaptation; participatory assessments

### Introduction

What would be different in the lives of women, men, and the communities and social-ecological landscapes they live in, if gender issues were to become a routine part of Vulnerability Assessments (VA)? A multi-hazard<sup>1</sup> VA is a participatory process through which the risks, vulnerabilities, and capacities of people and institutions in a given location (or a landscape) are analysed. VAs are an important tool for non-government organisations (NGOs) and other development actors, including governments because they help guide decision-making and resource allocation, but also because they can address unfair power dynamics and build cohesion among social groups and stakeholders. The framework that VAs provide can support resilience building, which requires positive change that originates from a reconsideration of structural inequalities, and the way these play out in development models. People, authorities, and organisations involved in humanitarian response and/or long-term development need structured and robust, yet simple, ways of developing an accurate picture of the root causes of vulnerabilities. They also need to be aware of the skills and capacities of individuals and their wider communities, enabling them to deal with risks and build their resilience. VAs can help in getting this understanding right.

The findings of a VA, and subsequent measures resulting from it, should contribute to building resilience to future change and shocks, including that of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. The findings of a VA should provide an extensive, 'landscape-wide' understanding of vulnerability and its underlying causes in a specific context. They can be used for designing programmes and projects that are relevant to different groups within a community. Beyond that, a VA can provide the evidence needed for community groups to engage in advocacy with local and municipal/district authorities. In addition, the process of undertaking a VA is valuable in its own right as it connects participants that would not be likely to connect otherwise, and builds their skills and capacities in the process.

This article draws on our combined experience as development practitioners, and considers what we have learnt about the importance of integrating gender issues into VAs. We aim to show through examples how a gendered VA can support women's rights and gender-equality agendas, as well as the impact that women (both as individuals and through women's organisations), can have on improving the quality of the analysis in VAs. We discuss Oxfam's Vulnerability & Risk Assessment (VRA) methodology as an example of a gendered VA that attempts to address gender inequality and women-specific risks explicitly, and to include women more actively in the assessment process. Drawing on our experience, we debate and suggest ways to ensure women systematically participate in, and influence, VAs. Finally, we provide our recommendations on how to carry out a gendered VA.

### Towards gender-transformative vulnerability and capacity assessments

Gender discrimination needs to be acknowledged as a key driver of vulnerability, and not just a compounding factor of it (Ravon 2014). Women and girls have traditionally been seen as the most vulnerable people in households and communities. While there is some truth to this, in the sense that women generally suffer more than men from the impact of climate stresses, extreme weather events and economic crises, vulnerability is by no means an inherent attribute of women. Rather, it stems from systemic marginalisation, inequality, and injustice. Reversing this injustice starts at the earliest stage of policy and programme design, and requires an in-depth understanding of the circumstances and the dynamics that generate inequalities. A gendered VA can deliver this.

Despite the influence of participatory philosophies of development and the methods which were evolved to put these into practice, structural power imbalances – and gender discrimination in particular – often remain insufficiently recognised as fundamental drivers of vulnerability. The philosophy behind participatory rural appraisals, later leading to broader VAs, has its modern origins in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire in the 1960s, and is also highly influenced by Robert Chambers' (1983) ideas that development policy needs to put the poorest and marginalised at the centre, and rely on their input for prioritising and planning development interventions.

VAs can act as a tool to challenge the status quo, promoting the agency of marginalised and vulnerable groups. They can also support transformational change, which is a foundational step to resilient development. Yet – in particular in relation to VAs focusing on climate change – there is currently a trend of 'declining attention to broad structural and relational drivers of vulnerability and inequality, and an inadequate understanding of vulnerability dynamics which hampers forward-looking change processes' (Tschakert et al. 2013, 340). This trend is unwelcome from development, poverty alleviation, and gender-inequality perspectives, as it can lead to inequalities being masked and reinforced.

A broad, inclusive VA methodology can serve to build bridges between groups made more vulnerable through inequalities, including gender inequality, and these bridges can

span different levels of governance. VAs need to incorporate a fundamental understanding that systems of oppression related to gender, race, class, and other identities interact and reinforce the many forms of discrimination that women and men experience. Failure to do so and to recognise women's role as capable agents of change will – at a minimum – produce misleading results, and ineffective risk reduction strategies. Worse, as hinted above, this biased view of vulnerability can be counterproductive for climate change adaptation and resilience planning, possibly leading to initiatives that fail to bring any sustainable and lasting change or that reinforce – or worsen – the status quo.

VAs designed with an explicit gender lens can advance women's rights and inclusion in resilience building. Yet most do not sufficiently or systematically address gender issues. Inadequate treatment of gender issues in VAs can stem from a variety of reasons, including the following: failure to recognise women's real and potential contribution to resilience (e.g. in agricultural production, in political advocacy, in emergency response and risk reduction); cultural barriers to women playing an active role in 'official' community engagement beyond the household; framing of vulnerability on single-sector, quantitative, technical terms (e.g. bio-physical); or ignorance about how gender issues relate to vulnerability. This last point is of particular interest, because it reflects the current difficulty that development actors face to engender VAs sufficiently and meaningfully.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of a discouraging trend to downplay or ignore the structural issues of vulnerability and marginalisation, efforts are being made by many organisations to act in solidarity with women and communities, by adopting gendered VA approaches. In the next section, we discuss some of these.

### Principles and case-study examples

The fundamental principles of gender-transformative VAs are clear. The VA should be consciously designed to reveal the factors that make women more (or less) vulnerable than men, and should challenge the power imbalance that undermines women's contributions to development more widely. A VA therefore needs to involve the participation of women as well as men. Women make specific and valuable contributions to their households and communities, and, during VAs, add value by describing and discussing this, analysing the challenges they face, and planning and implementing research, policies, and programming. Participating in VAs enables women to be included in decision-making processes, leading, and influencing. This will ultimately build the resilience of women themselves (as individuals and collectively); and the resilience of households and communities more widely.

The Disaster Pressure and Release Model, developed in the early 1990s (Blaikie *et al.* 1994), is a conceptual framework used by development and humanitarian practitioners to understand and respond to people's vulnerability to disasters.<sup>2</sup> The model conceptualises disasters as the intersection of two opposing forces: the root causes of vulnerability, on one side, and the physical 'trigger event'. Importantly, the model

demonstrates that the risk of disaster can only be reduced if the root causes of vulnerability are addressed. Gender issues have been integrated into the model so that it reflects the 'gendered progression of vulnerability' (Smyth and Hai 2012, 8). This can enable practitioners to consider the different roles of men and women appropriately in the face of extreme natural events, both in terms of exposure to risk and agency in responding to and overcoming hazards. Responses can then be designed which respond to the interests and needs of both sexes and build resilience.

Guidance for gender mainstreaming in climate change adaptation has led to the development of specific handbooks providing advice on gendering VAs (Kulima Integrated Development Solutions 2014). An example is the *Gender-sensitive Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis* (Kulima Integrated Development Solutions 2014). The GCVCA is sensitive to gender issues, and potentially transformative. It results in a comprehensive understanding of women's capacities and vulnerabilities (through focusing on their specific needs as women within a gender division of labour in a particular context, differences in their perceptions of risk, the issue of differentiated access to and control over assets, and so on), as well as their capacities (e.g. specialist knowledge derived from their social and economic positioning, their coping strategies, and any particular indigenous knowledge women have).

Oxfam's own VRA methodology (Morchain and Kelsey forthcoming) is aiming, through its implementation in over ten countries, to increasingly embed gender issues in its understanding of vulnerability and to support women's resilience explicitly. Oxfam's VRA looks at the way different groups within a community, as well as the landscape it is situated in, are impacted by hazards or structural issues. These include weather and climate-related hazards like drought, but also discrimination and other aspects of gender relations that may lead to inequality. In our own experience in Oxfam, as we use and further develop the VRA, the gender dimensions are coming more sharply into focus; but much more remains to be done to address the complexities of vulnerability and risk systematically and inclusively enough. We believe this difficulty is prevalent in other VA methodologies that seek to address gender. Research undertaken by Oxfam Canada has highlighted that in order to be transformative, resilience-building initiatives need to be understood as a long-term process of social transformation, and should therefore incorporate a stronger focus on confronting attitudes and beliefs about gender in order to shift the power dynamics that exacerbate vulnerabilities. Much of the thinking that features in this article is currently being used to inform our ongoing development of the VRA.

A key challenge for the VRA – as for other VA methodologies – is to include women in its processes systematically. Specifically, the VRA assesses the contributions that women can provide in reducing vulnerability. To do this, it needs to be informed by an analysis of existing and evolving power dynamics. The VRA methodology tries to ensure fair participation, and analyses the effect of a particular disaster, shock, or change by sex and other aspects of social differentiation, enabling an understanding

of the social roots of vulnerability and of the risks to different social groups. This encourages a thorough appreciation of the realities women and men face within the landscape, and highlights the daily experiences and circumstances of different women and groups of women (e.g. looking at their profession or main livelihood activity, marital status, skills, ethnicity, and so on).

While we work to improve our own practice, we recognise that the benefits that come from the adoption of gender-sensitive VAs go beyond comprehensive understanding and in-depth analyses of differentiated vulnerability and capacity. The potential of such inclusive and tailored approaches consists of the opportunity to enhance women's empowerment while also encouraging the positive structural change that is needed to address gender imbalances and enable long-term resilience. This obviously does not come without challenges.

In the next sections, we look at principles of gender-transformative VAs, and offer case-study examples.

### *Listening to women's voices*

The inclusiveness of women (regardless of class, ethnicity, [dis]abilities, caste, race, or other identities) in VAs is critical and can foster structural changes in society if their views are truly heard and incorporated throughout. This is sometimes an issue of diversity based on race, disability, or other aspects of identity which shape a woman's life and choices. However, it can also be about intra-household and intra-marital dynamics, which are less visible to neighbours and outsiders involved in participatory VAs. Women who are most vulnerable in this way may well be least active in discussions, sometimes because of the shaming or embarrassing effects of particular forms of powerlessness which lead to vulnerability, and/or inability to act (e.g. an abusive husband may mean a woman experiences lack of control over her own body, and voicelessness within the marital relationship and the family). Addressing these sensitive and highly context-specific issues may require longer-term work with the communities and other stakeholders to ensure that, among other goals, the outcome of VAs is truly unbiased and entirely representative.

### *Promoting women's empowerment through active participation*

Focusing on getting women involved in equal numbers as participants in VAs is only a first step. Their participation needs to be active. Encouraging this can involve building women's confidence, including training in public speaking and 'formal' communication skills to prepare them to play active roles in the process, for example as facilitators, note-takers, and leaders of break-out group discussions; and ensuring that proposals for reducing vulnerability as a result of the VA specifically include women in active roles.

An example is the case of the community of Jabonga in the Philippines, where a VA was carried out which highlighted the need to promote women's active and high-profile

participation in activities designed to strengthen the capacity of the community to respond to the impacts of extreme weather events and other hazards. For instance, women staff from local government and NGOs were trained to operate the newly installed automatic weather station and communicate weather forecasts to community members and others living in a 30 km radius (personal experience, May 2014). In addition to building the self-confidence of individuals, this kind of initiative places women in prominent roles, where others can see them succeeding and are inspired to follow their lead.

Another example from the Philippines is from the Amontay community in Mindanao, where VA findings led to action in the wake of the identification of the full impact of migration of women to urban areas to work as maids. Female migration was taking place as a response to the loss of income provided through fishing due to fisherfolk losing their boats and fishing equipment as a result of typhoons, strong winds, and storm surges. Women identified that the pressure to migrate for work was having negative effects on their lives and the stability of their families – including the break-up of relationships and children leaving school. Opening up space for discussion of this problem, and jointly assessing potential alternatives to the negative sides of women's migration, resulted in the identification of alternative livelihood opportunities for women and in community-wide consensus on the need to support these. This, in turn, leads to a reduction in the number of women migrating to cities (personal experience, November 2013).

A final example from the Philippines shows that participating in workshops, community discussions, and training can be a confidence boost and provide women with the opportunity to share experiences, report their challenges, participate in public life for the first time, discover their capacities and be heard by others in decision-making roles. A roundtable informal discussion on disaster risk reduction with women in the province of Cotabato, Philippines, following their involvement in a VRA, evidences the positive impact that a gender-sensitive participatory VA can have (focus group discussion led by Daniel Morchain in Kidapawan City, Mindanao, May 2014). Women here reported that they had increased their confidence in public speaking, started to engage in discussions with men as equals, and actively contributed to disaster risk reduction planning. In addition, as a result of implementing measures resulting from VA findings, they increased their skills on technical issues related to disaster risk reduction/climate change adaptation and sustainable agriculture which, in turn, improved their technical communication ability. This proved to be critical for ensuring credibility in multi-stakeholder discussions.

As a result of this enhanced representation and capacity, women in Cotabato reported having secured funding to support the development of vegetable gardens in the household, with the expected effect of improving nutrition and food security. Vegetable gardening, being primarily a women's livelihood activity, would have most



likely been disregarded in traditional male-dominated narratives around VA and planning if women had not participated in these discussions.

Participatory VAs also represent spaces for women to organise and become more active within their communities. Women's collective action can bring psychological benefits to women by providing emotional support for sharing similar problems, friendship, and self-confidence. Women from the Bushbuckridge communities in the Mpumalanga province, in South Africa, who were actively involved in a VA, decided to organise and register themselves formally under South African law as a non-profit organisation – the Kukula Traditional Health Practitioners Association of Bushbuckridge – as a result of their interaction during the VA process and the opportunity it gave for mobilisation and planning (Sibuye *et al.* 2012). Through the VA process, the women gained awareness regarding their rights as health practitioners and went on to use another outcome of the VA – a written document, known as their Community Protocol – as the basis for constructive dialogue between their organisation and the stakeholders making decisions affecting their rights and interests. As a result of these dialogues, in which the management committee of the Association was able to engage more equally with decision-makers, the women were successful in having their sustainable livelihood practices recognised and in negotiating access to medicinal plants in an area that had once been sealed off to them.

### *Involving women's organisations in VAs*

A key way of ensuring greater responsiveness to women's concerns is to involve women's organisations in the research, planning, and implementation of disaster responses and longer-term development initiatives. They are frequently far closer to women 'on the ground' than NGOs can be. However, they are comparatively rarely consulted by aid agencies in VAs and disaster preparedness strategies. Women's organisations interviewed by Oxfam (Ravon 2014) explained that they are not valued as legitimate actors in the area of resilience and emergency response because of their perceived lack of technical capacity and reach. When they are consulted, they are often limited to the role of 'identifying' vulnerable individuals or groups within a community.

This clearly represents an untapped potential. Women's organisations are an important player in resilience building and in bringing about transformation that positively affects and engages women. Indeed, women's organisations have also called out the international community's approach to vulnerability, and have developed innovative methodologies in response. For example, the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International, two global networks of women's organisations, launched a community resilience campaign in 2010 to bring women's priorities and practices into discussions on resilience, in order to transform mainstream approaches to addressing vulnerability to disasters. The campaign has sought to improve the quality and impact of post-disaster initiatives by deliberately addressing power relationships, helping networks of

grassroots women frame vulnerability and resilience in their own terms, and building women's leadership to become active agents of relief, recovery, and reconstruction efforts.

Gender-sensitive VAs should actively involve local women's organisations in the design and implementation process, precisely because of the critical role that women's collective organising plays in building resilience. During a Learning Forum on Women's Rights and Resilience in Ottawa, Canada on 24–25 September 2013, Gloria Cerón from the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) spoke of the need to ensure that donors and aid agencies do not merely focus on women's vulnerability to shocks, but recognise and support the capacity of women's organisations to respond to crises themselves (<http://go.oxfam.ca/docs/learning-forum-on-wr-and-resilience-september-2013.pdf>, last checked by the authors 10 September 2015). When designed in co-ordination with local women's groups, VAs can offer the opportunity for women and men at the community level to discuss, unpack, and challenge existing gender stereotypes and unequal roles and responsibilities, beginning a process of transformative change.

### *Engaging men in gender-sensitive VAs*

The inclusion of men in gender-sensitive VAs is important. If women challenge power relations in a head-on fashion, this can expose them to additional risk. Therefore, a positive trend in addressing vulnerability from a gender perspective has been actively including men in the process.

Arguments which carry weight with men include acknowledging the impact on communities of systemic inequalities and discrimination against women (e.g. causing inefficiencies in agricultural production and subsequently in food security, to name one example). Gender inequality also has a negative impact on men as well as women. Sharing power and responsibilities with women can free men from the stranglehold of traditional masculinity that is often associated with rigid social beliefs of toughness and invulnerability. Changes towards gender equality will require new notions of masculinity that can be built only by engaging men and representing women's empowerment as a win-win situation for the overall community. VAs should be an opportunity to identify existing men's efforts in promoting positive change so that they can be supported and encouraged.

However, if VAs are not designed and facilitated well, there is a risk that men can lead discussions to reflect only their perspectives by perpetuating power over women. Stacey Scriver, a researcher, recalls a men's group meeting in Southern Africa, where what

*began as a discussion around GBV [gender-based violence] and the risks for HIV associated with this turned into a session of the men in the group blaming women's empowerment for GBV. The*

*facilitator wasn't able to regain control of the discussion and the men continued to lend their support to each other for this view. (Personal communication, 11 May 2015)*

### *The importance of capacity building*

When it comes to contributing to developing the agency of marginalised and vulnerable groups – as well as of women in general – capacity building is an important area of investment for development actors. The success of participatory VAs and the wider transformative resilient development agenda depends on these groups' engagement: their capacity, their interest, their ability, confidence, and willingness to dedicate their time and resources to the process and engage with development actors as partners rather than passive beneficiaries.

To enable this engagement, appropriate action from development actors and authorities is needed. Donor agencies and NGOs should set targets to increase their number of partnerships with women's organisations. Ideally, they should invest in building both the capacity of women's organisations to work on some of the dimensions of VAs and their staff to conduct gender-sensitive VAs that can provide the opportunity for such capacity building. The resulting mix of instrumentalist and transformational approaches to development planning, the first attempting to mainstream gender through poverty agendas and the second endeavouring a more structural change through the promotion of women's empowerment and men's engagement, addresses gender inequalities and aims to represent the needs of differentiated groups of women properly.

Oxfam and other development actors have encouraged increasing stakeholders' skills at combining instrumentalist and transformational approaches. In the experience of a senior gender policy advisor, a 'business case' or instrumentalist argument may 'open the dialogue' and persuade colleagues and officials to take women's issues more seriously and invest in change (Thalia Kidder, personal communication, June 2015). A women's rights and transformational approach is critical, however, in order to achieve long-lasting outcomes. Kidder warns that processes focusing exclusively on instrumentalist approaches tend to make it harder to transition later into a transformational approach.

### *Combining approaches to gender justice and development*

It is important to consider thoughtfully the planned combination of approaches to gender inequality and development in general. For instance, while the resilience and gender-equality narratives can contribute to each other's goals, the synergies are by no means automatic. If resilience is framed from the top down by senior policymakers rather than by women inhabiting the social-ecological landscape in question themselves, it can overlook significant context-specific issues and undermine the work of grassroots

women's organisations. During the International Food Policy Research Institute's conference on 'Building Resilience for Food and Nutrition Security' in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 15–17 May 2014, for example, there was considerable enthusiasm around gender and its role in the resilience agenda. However, gender issues were mostly debated at a rather abstract level and detailed discussions about the role that gender inclusion can play for resilience building were rare. Speakers addressing gender focused, in general, on the nutrition of mother and child; top-level messages about the critical importance of women in farming and in community resilience; and the need to understand and address risks affecting women specifically. Little attention was dedicated to enhancing the roles of women's rights organisations and feminist groups as agents in setting the resilience agenda, and being actively involved in both planning and implementation processes (Daniel Morchain, personal experience, May 2014).

Integration of gender issues into thinking about VAs and resilience requires in-depth joint work across stakeholders, with women, men, and women's rights organisations; not just a half-hearted effort to check the box of 'mainstreaming gender'. Gender mainstreaming in VAs (based on level playing-field gender relations) is critical to resilience building. As resilience gains prominence for many aid agencies and donors as a 'way of working', humanitarian and development actors would be wise to acknowledge and support actively the relevance of women's agency and the importance of gender-sensitive approaches to meet resilience agenda goals.

In the next section, we present our own list of practical recommendations to support better integration of gender-equality concerns into VAs.

## Designing and conducting gender-transformative VAs: our suggestions

In order to support and enhance fully women's capacity as agents for change within their communities and the wider landscape, VAs need to look beyond identifying women as a potentially vulnerable group; rather, they need to understand why women are vulnerable, in what areas they are particularly able to overcome challenges and reduce risks, and to support proactively their capacity to address vulnerability at the individual, household, community, and landscape level.

Below is a list of practical recommendations:

- *Choose a VA methodology with a landscape-wide contextual understanding of vulnerability and the root causes behind it.* Oxfam's VRA tool is just one example of a VA methodology that takes a broad view of vulnerability and seeks to uncover its root causes in order to promote holistic development planning and discourage single-sector priorities from setting the tone of local and landscape-level development. We think VAs that take such an approach will be more successful in drawing attention to forms of gender inequality and discrimination that are often invisible, or perceived as tangential to core development issues,

providing the opportunity to name deeply entrenched inequalities and challenge them concretely through resulting risk reduction initiatives, rather than leaving these issues on the sidelines for 'gender projects' and women's organisations to deal with alone.

- *Include women's organisations, women's groups or leaders within mixed organisations when conducting VAs.* Build a picture of existing gender roles and power dynamics – in the households, community, country – and how these act as barriers to women's ability to act, prior to conducting a VA. Take the time to ask women about their daily lives, their values and priorities, how they share information and how they contribute to decision-making at different levels. Women themselves will often have strategies to work around male-dominated decision-making. Ask women how they would like to participate in the VA and ask for their ideas on how to gather information from/about all members of the community, including children for example (this may encourage women to talk about their own vulnerability 'through' their children's vulnerability). In addition, having these conversations can promote women's participation in the analysis of the findings and the design of response strategies.
- *Create a non-threatening environment for women to express their views.* Being flexible about when and where to carry out data collection is likely to increase the numbers of women participating and also the number that feel comfortable expressing their views and participating actively. This may mean arranging meetings at water supply sites or clinics, for example. It may also mean holding women-only pre-meetings to allow them to discuss their views before nominating a representative to speak during a mixed-gender participatory activity – and then linking up with similar processes being undertaken with men. If illiteracy is high among women, use diagrams and maps and storyboards rather than text. If women are afraid of speaking in front of their husbands or other male members of the community, use forum theatre so that women's vulnerabilities and strengths can be acted rather than personalised or visual support (i.e. photography) as a less intrusive and more empowering means of self-expression.
- *Be aware of limitations and time constraints.* Including women in the VAs in a meaningful way is not easy. Time and mobility constraints need to be considered along with the risk of overburdening women with additional tasks. Caregiving responsibilities and livelihood activities often make it difficult for women to participate actively in VAs. Ensure a convenient time and place for the VA activities is arranged in order to avoid additional pressure being added to women's busy daily schedules.
- *Improve women's access to information and knowledge prior to meetings.* Spend time with women before conducting a VA to identify and address gaps in their access to information and knowledge in any matters related to their vulnerability, including their capacity to bring about change (e.g. support women's learning

around their existing coping strategies in order to enhance their resilience). Prepare women for the VA methodology, provide training in leadership skills, build confidence and communication skills, and include initiatives to raise awareness (among both women and men) about women's rights. Ensuring that women not only access information but also contribute to the discussions is paramount. Women's knowledge, which differs from men's knowledge, is indeed crucial for adaptation and resilience planning. Women develop and adopt different coping strategies as they perceive, identify, and cope with risk differently because of their social roles, identities, and often limited access to resources. This has to be acknowledged and, if these strategies are indeed beneficial, they should be strengthened and capitalised.

- *Keep men informed and encourage their involvement in women-focused activities.* In addition to spending time with women prior to conducting a VA, make time to speak to men, particularly community leaders, and promote women's active participation. Identify potential male advocates for strengthening women's voices, and keep in mind that men listening to women's views can be a first step towards transformational change as they realise what women can contribute to risk reduction and resilience building. Women's organisations interviewed by Oxfam in Latin America, Africa, and Asia all recommended that technical VAs and risk reduction initiatives go hand-in-hand with efforts to shift attitudes and beliefs about gender. More than a technical exercise, VAs should be viewed as an opportunity to challenge cultural stereotypes that reinforce women's marginalisation and vulnerability to shocks and stresses (Ravon 2014). VAs are widely acknowledged to be a first step for empowering communities and can start the process of social transformation (CARE 2014). The opportunity for men and women to meet each other and discuss gender roles and relations can foster reflection leading to change; men can be encouraged to think about women's positive contribution (potential and current) to development and resilience. Because they are often in a position of privilege compared to women, men tend to reflect less on gender inequalities. Therefore, as highlighted earlier, presenting gender equality as a win-win situation rather than a threat to masculinity is key.
- *Build the capacity of women to take on specific roles and responsibilities in the VA process.* Provide training to encourage and inspire women to take on specific roles in the vulnerability and risk assessment process – as facilitators, note-takers, and leaders of group discussions, for example – so that they experience playing influential roles in the process, rather than simply being offered the opportunity to comment. Furthermore, give women specific leadership roles in the ongoing monitoring of community vulnerability, e.g. in early warning committees or by drawing up communication trees to demonstrate how women connect different social groups within the community. Enabling women to take on these roles early in the process will help to ensure that hazards affecting women are addressed and

that proposals for reducing vulnerability and building resilience include activities where women take an active role.

- *Move beyond gender-disaggregated data.* Given that inequality stems from the intersection of different social identities (i.e. gender, status, ethnicity, class, age), it is important to investigate their interaction in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of women's vulnerability. This level of disaggregation will also enable different levels of vulnerability within the same category to be identified (i.e. how and why vulnerability differs among groups of women). Inequality is not only about gender. Likewise, women are not inherently vulnerable because of their sex.
- *Identify coping mechanisms that are harmful.* Take care to recognise when existing coping mechanisms further entrench gender inequalities and disempower women, and pay particular attention not to unintentionally celebrate and reinforce sexual stereotypes that may exacerbate women's disproportionate responsibility for coping with the effects of stresses and shocks.
- *Consider intra-household dynamics.* Gender-blind VAs tend to ignore many intra-household dynamics that put women at risk (e.g. violence against women, lack of contraceptives, implications of polygamy, unequal division of unpaid care, etc.) and, as a result, these issues do not get factored into resilience-building and risk reduction projects. Gendered VAs need to address these issues.
- *Dedicate resources to the VA.* The team facilitating a VA needs to have knowledge about gender and/or be trained on gender issues in advance. It also needs to understand time requirements of the VA and manage time wisely. Likewise, a budget for VA implementation and for analysing findings is needed, and it has to be gender-sensitive so that sufficient time is spent on addressing gender appropriately during the exercise's implementation and analysis.

## Conclusions

Because VAs can set the ground for understanding the realities of communities and of landscapes; because gender relations are a key determinant of how well and how equitably societies function; and because the risks women are exposed to and their contribution to resilience is greater than is normally acknowledged, gender needs to be an essential, standard element of VAs.

VAs are unlikely to be successful in fostering a transformational way of thinking unless they take a wide, in-depth, and gendered look at the context they seek to understand. All VAs should be gendered; no exception. A VA must facilitate a dialogue in which the voices of both women and men are heard; and recognise that addressing and reducing the vulnerability of social groups and the necessary trade-offs associated require joint recognition of gender-related inequalities, the dynamics involved, and

the overall benefits that addressing gender issues has on household-, community-, and landscape-level resilience.

Engendering VAs is no easy task. It requires painstaking and patient dedication to stakeholder engagement processes and to understanding and addressing the nuances of gender relations and invisible power dynamics. Many development actors continuously dedicate efforts to finding ways to be more gender-sensitive in understanding the risks and vulnerabilities women, men, and children face, what the root causes of these are, and the individual's and the system's capacities to overcome them. Still, much progress is needed before this is done widely in a systematic and robust way. Indeed, even among practitioners finding case studies that successfully illustrate this necessary practice – such as for this article – remains a challenge.

Finally, it is a major concern that analysing and acting on the findings of VAs is not always happening! VAs often remain an 'academic' exercise that brings limited benefit to communities and marginalised groups. VAs need to be considered more than just as extractive exercises, but rather the foundation for forward, participatory planning and the grounds from where to build common agendas for solving conflicts and addressing gender inequalities.

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## Notes

- 1 In this context, the term multi-hazard refers to a broad understanding of the root causes of vulnerability and risks. While some VAs focus, for instance, exclusively on weather and climate-related impacts, we believe that vulnerability and risks can only be addressed when a VA assesses the full spectrum of hazards and issues that contribute to generating



these vulnerabilities and risks. As such, a list of hazards or issues may include droughts and changing rainfall patterns, but also insufficient access to markets or health services, lack of access to land, or armed conflict.

- 2 For more information on VAs, see Blaikie *et al.* (1994); and for an Oxfam approach focusing on gender issues, see Smyth and Hai (2012).

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