

VULNERABILITIES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN DISASTER SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Women and children are traditionally viewed as among the most vulnerable sectors of society in disaster situations, and even in normal times. Women, being the disadvantaged sex, suffer multiple burdens which are intensified during disaster situations. They are confronted by previously unfaced/unknown tasks, especially in relation to the traditionally-expected task of caring/sustaining and protecting children from harm. In addition, caregivers are again traditionally, mostly women. Children, being in the years of life where most of their mental and physical development occurs, are exposed to various dangers during disasters. And when they come from marginalized sectors and already suffer from problems like malnutrition, ill health and lack of opportunities for development, disaster situations further highlight their already grim situation.

These realities point to a particularly urgent need for caregivers and policy-makers to develop appreciation of the situation of women and children, both their vulnerabilities and their capacities. Women, and even children, have potentials and actualities which could be tapped and/or developed by sensitive caregivers. Hopefully, more services suited to their particular situation would develop and be made accessible to them.

VULNERABILITIES OF WOMEN

Our first priority is to get old people and the women and the children out. This was how the *Inquirer* quoted Vice Mayor Anianas of Bacolor, Pampanga last September when lahar inundated their town again. What makes women and the children so vulnerable to disasters?

Even before a disaster strikes, women in Philippine society are already disadvantaged. Their main responsibility is in the domestic sphere. Giving birth and rearing children; taking charge of daily domestic activities; plus their "wifely" responsibilities to their husbands. Like the men, they also face the economic crisis of our country. Increasingly, they need to contribute to the family income. On top of these, they are also expected to volunteer in projects for their community's well-being. Such are their multiple burden in normal times.

What if a typhoon floods their palay or corn fields? If drought forces farmers to consume their rice and corn and their seeds as well? If red tide unables fisherfolk to sell their catch? Lahar could bury everything. Military operations can displace whole indigenous people's communities. In normal times, a woman's burden is never done. During disasters, they are worse off.

The loss of the usual income gravely affects women, since they are expected to ensure food on the table. Losing their harvest as well as their backyard gardens, women sometimes go hungry because they feed their husband and children first and live on their crumbs, even when they breastfeed and need more food.

Because they are still expected to keep house in common, cramped and dirty evacuation centers, they work more to come up with some semblance of home. Usually without sufficient water, they spend a lot of time queuing up for and carrying drinking, cooking or cleaning water.

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Women worry more how to keep off the usual epidemics normal in unsanitary evacuation sites from their malnourished children they are expected to care for. They also lose the time they used to have when the small ones go to school because either the schools have become evacuation centers or classes have been suspended - an added stress on their jangled nerves.

Where men cannot find another job, as in Pinatubo, tensions in the home, including wife-beating cannot be unexpected. Plus sexual demands, which do not decline during disasters, especially when there is nothing to do. Not only do the women do not want to get pregnant, they also feel uncomfortable to do it in centers where families live beside each other. Not to mention their tired bodies and stressed nerves.

WOMEN COPE

To cope, women, whose husbands are away at work when disaster strikes or where they look after their homes to salvage whatever, as in Pinatubo, and single mothers or widows solo handedly haul the children together to safety with odds and ends which they could grab. Often without money, they are forced to find food, line up for relief and find somewhere to stay, unknown tasks for a *plain housewife*.

They also have to earn income. Where before they washed their families' clothes, now they accept *labada* (laundry) of other families. They not only cook for their families, they also cook to vend on the side. Sometimes, they even work as *katulong* (domestic) and extend their domestic responsibilities to others' homes. In addition, they grab agencies' food- or cash-for-work or slavish subcontracts just to earn a little more to fend off hunger. In Pinatubo where these "jobs" are the more common income sources, many women become the breadwinners for their husbands who are farmers but with no land to till. They look and look for jobs that could not be found in empty productivity centers that should bring about Philippines 2000.

In addition, they are expected to volunteer for the community's well-being. Many agencies seek their assistance from packing relief goods to listing beneficiaries to delivering health assistance.

Before a disaster, women are expected to deliver multiple responsibilities. During disasters where women have even less resources and facilities than before the disaster struck, they are expected to deliver the same responsibilities. And more!

VULNERABILITIES OF CHILDREN

The children, on the other hand, being dependent on adults, are exposed to many physical uncertainties of survival -- lack of food and clean drinking water, unsanitary shelter, closed school, poor health services. Where before they were already malnourished; now, they face hunger and epidemics. In armed conflict situations, they face even death.

Their family and community life is also destabilized. Where they used to have a regular daily pattern of existence where they wake up, eat, clean up and go to school then play, now they have so much time in cramped, dirty tent cities, where their parents line up for food and everybody shares the water pumps and even the toilets which also serve as the bathrooms. In the Mampis Tent City in Bacolor, for example, almost 3,000 people have to make do with 11 potable pumps, 18 non-potable pumps and 55 toilets cum bathrooms.

On top of these, children get a lot of negative vibrations from their elders, insecure not only of their immediate lifelines but also of their future.

Consider these in the backdrop of the principle of "First Call" where the United Nations call on all nations to give children high priority in allocating resources. At all times, in good as well as in disastrous ones, children are in their first few years of life when most mental and physical development occurs, for which, there is no second chance. In disaster situations, they face so much risk of not sufficiently developing their many aspects. Worse, damages cannot be undone or are very difficult to undo.

CAPACITIES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The vulnerabilities of women and children far outweigh their capacities for now. But women and children have capacities, even during disaster situations. And these should be studied, factored into our strategies and plans of responses and developed, not only to make our work easier but more important, to empower them to help themselves. In the process, we help them not only now but also in their future.

The cliché that disasters are opportunities is especially true for women. Before, they leaned on their husbands as their "plain housewives". During disasters, they are called upon to make decisions and carry them out, heretofore actions done by their partners. Thus, mothers had to secure the children from Pinatubo's ashfall or lahar and from Ormoc's flashfloods, also from bombs falling from the sky, in case of man made disaster.

On the part of the children, they are indispensable helpers in many daily chores, from fetching water to minding smaller children. Elder children may be developed and maximized for community day care and other collective activities for children. These could provide them not only better play but also learning opportunities aside from psychosocial therapeutic exercises including understanding their situation and how to cope.

They are also known to be capable of articulating their situation and needs and thus would be enlightening to caregivers.

In addition, happy and occupied children make for more relaxed mothers with more time to do other things if not some time to rest. Always, empowering children empowers women as well.

WHAT TO DO

Most important and urgent is to study and understand the vulnerabilities as well as capacities of women and children so we can factor these into our strategies and plans of action. In the framework of helping them help themselves, our services will not only benefit them now but will go a long way into their distant futures.

Another must is to help them organize themselves. Providing them trainings and education will also equip them with basic knowledge and skills and will develop their self-confidence, not only as more active community members but even as community leaders.

Another is actively seeking them and asking for their situation and particular needs and their views on how to best address their plight. Often, caregivers consult the "head" of the household, forgetting the important roles women play in the family and in the community. Women should be developed so they will better be able to decide for themselves. But we should not forget that women are in an ever more burdened situation. Caregivers should take into account that they can be tapped to help better their conditions. But to be able to help, they have to be supported themselves. Where they have to help earn income, especially where they become the breadwinners, somebody or their husbands, or setting up day care centers, would ease their childcare responsibility. Where they may contribute to community welfare, as grassroots health workers, relief workers, project managers or community leaders, their overworked situations have to be considered. So trainings or community meetings should be set when they are not tied up with their daily chores. Something to explore is providing day care for the small ones when such activities will be held.

Caregivers should also address the problem of lack of or limited resources and facilities that women need in their many daily tasks. Water, health and sanitation problems are usually the women's concern. Prioritizing them eases their daily burden. Health personnel should also give special attention to their health situation and needs, women being least concerned for themselves. Usually, they suffer from birthing - or reproductive—related problems. Pregnant and breastfeeding women also require additional nutritional requirements. The latter should be encouraged and supported to continue breastfeeding.

Children's particularities, on the other hand, should be considered in planning our relief packs. They should be counted as individual members of the family. Thus, bigger families deserve more food items. If community kitchens or feeding centers are opened, their small stomachs should be remembered as best nourished by many, small amounts of heavy food items like *sinangag*, boiled camote, bananas or corn. For babies, we should add food for lactating mothers. We believe that formulas are a no-no and breastmilk is their best nourishment.

Recent developments in disaster response work such as psychosocial therapeutic play and exercises are very suitable for children. Psychosocial interactions are likewise helpful for strained adults.

Assigning the children some regular though simple tasks will also lend some order to the disorder that the disaster has wrought in their young lives.

Finally, recent moves to include disaster preparedness in school curriculum, like requiring educational trips to agencies like PAGASA, PHIVOLCS, should be encouraged and supported. Such prepare them now and even for their growing up and having children of their own.

There are many more that could be done for women and children. Our work will never end. Suffice it to say that knowing their vulnerabilities and capacities and then working on these will start the ball rolling.

As Ms. Dionita David, the Pinatubo survivor in CDRC's PLDT sponsored advertisement said, *Akala ko, hindi ko makakayanan ang hirap ng pagiging biktima ng bulkan. Pero pinakita sa akin ... meron din pala akong lakas. (I thought I wouldn't be able to bear the hardships of being a victim of the volcano. But I realized...I also have strength)*