

CASE STUDY #2 – GENDER AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

Hurricane Mitch in Central America

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Hurricane Mitch in 1998 was the “storm of the century” in Central America, and the human, social, and economic losses were staggering in the four main countries affected: Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. The hurricane was classified as Category 5, the highest level on the Saffir-Simpson scale, meaning that it had gale force winds of up to 285 km/hour. It brought historic amounts of rainfall, with unofficial reports of up to 75 inches (1900 mm). Severe flooding lasted for days, with many people stranded in tree branches without food or water.

Deaths due to catastrophic flooding and landslides made it the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane in history; nearly 11,000 people were killed with over 11,000 left missing. Many of the unidentified were buried in mass graves, resulting in great uncertainty over the final death toll. Altogether, 2.7 million people were left homeless or missing in all. The flooding caused extreme damage, estimated at over \$5 billion USD.

The most marginalized members of society, including small producers, street children, and female-headed households were among the ranks of the poor hardest hit by Mitch. Following the passage of Mitch, disease outbreaks due to lack of sanitation occurred throughout Central America, including cholera, leptospirosis, malaria and dengue fever. The severe crop shortages left many villages on the brink of starvation.

Despite the fact that Central America is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, relatively little prevention, preparedness or mitigation was in place prior to Hurricane Mitch. Some disaster committees in Honduras designed emergency plans in which women were to evacuate and take care of dependents while men were assigned the role of protecting assets, including land and animals. As a result, female-headed households were forced to choose between their children and their assets.

Although additional data are needed, most preliminary analyses indicate that gender was a critical variable during and immediately after Hurricane Mitch. Slightly more men than women died as a direct result of Hurricane Mitch – 57% of the dead were men in El Salvador, and 54% in Nicaragua – most likely due to male involvement in search and rescue and men’s higher levels of risk tolerance. Men and women worked side-by-side during the emergency and observers were impressed by the high level of community participation. The fact that women cleared roads, dug wells, and performed other non-traditional tasks was surprising to many relief workers. Women’s groups mobilized to clear roads, provide food assistance, and organize relief efforts at community level.

During the rehabilitation phase, and especially in temporary shelters, women took on a “triple duty” of reproductive work, community organizing, and productive work in the informal economy, while men tended to return to their traditional role of waged work outside the home. The tremendous impacts of the disaster on children and the elderly were largely shouldered by women. Female heads of households increased from a pre-disaster level of 24.3 percent to 40 percent in Nicaragua, and went from 20.4 percent to over 50 percent in Honduras. Male migration increased substantially following the hurricane.

Agricultural losses were the single biggest economic impact of the hurricane; small producers, with few reserve resources, were especially hard hit. Reports indicate that women, who tend to have smaller plots and less access to credit and extension services than men do, are dropping out of agricultural production.

Men and women exhibited markedly differing coping mechanisms during the rehabilitation phase. Women continue to be “on the job,” mobilizing social networks and engaging in reproductive work, while men have generally resorted to risky behavior, with both positive and negative consequences; for example, search and rescue missions and dangerous reconstruction efforts on one hand, and gambling, increased alcohol consumption, and aggression on the other.

There were clear gendered differences in the perception of the disaster’s impacts. Women in one community in Nicaragua listed “fear” as the worst impact of the disaster, and men in the same community thought “decreased coffee production” was the worst thing about the disaster. Most short-term rehabilitation projects featured “men with bulldozers” and concentrated on public infrastructure, which were not necessarily the identified priorities of the local population.

*Based on excerpts from studies by the Inter-American Development Bank,
World Bank, Patricia Delaney and Elizabeth Schrader*

Questions for discussion:

1. If a major disaster such as this occurred in Fiji, would men also be more likely to die than women? If so, why?
2. What can be learned from this experience, so that people will be less vulnerable in the next disaster?
3. How can the capacities of women in Central America be strengthened, so that they can better protect their own lives and the lives of others during the next tsunami?
4. What differences and implications do you see between how men and women’s livelihoods were affected under this disaster?