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Reducing the Vulnerability of Women in Disaster Stricken Areas

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(Source: UNFPA Organization)

Case Snapshot

Disasters are inevitable phenomena that have badly affected lives and even destroyed families as they have been exposed to certain state of vulnerabilities. Along with these situations are the frequent occurrences of violent acts on women and children. Women and children are greatly exposed to certain vulnerabilities during these situations. For women and children, gender based violence such as rape, human trafficking, and domestic abuse are more observable in disaster-stricken areas.¹ Therefore, these vicious effects of disaster and crisis situations on women and children must receive great attention.

Vulnerability is defined as *“the characteristic of a person or group and their situation that influences their capability to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural disaster.”*² These vulnerabilities are highly identified by various factors such as individual economic status, culture, gender, age, and disabilities. Likewise, these are influenced by factors such as one’s access to resources, capacities, exposure to risks, and their gender needs. People are exposed

to a number of vulnerabilities that limit their abilities to protect themselves from harmful elements especially during and after a disaster.

As the Philippines is situated on the Western Pacific Typhoon belt and the border of the Pacific Ring of Fire, it regularly experience typhoon and other natural disaster, making the country vulnerable to disaster that may lead to loss of lives, homes, and livelihoods.³ In the Philippines, the context of struggle during disaster is highly defined by poverty, landlessness, unsystematic and politicized distribution of relief and aid, and lack of influence on the management-related decision making process in disaster. In 2013, the Philippines was hit by the Super Typhoon Yolanda (international name: Typhoon Haiyan). It is during these times that women and children are most vulnerable to various forms of violence especially sexual abuse.⁴ One of the main factors that influence the vulnerabilities of women is the structural inequalities and discrimination present in the society even before the occurrence of disaster.

This policy brief discusses the role of women during disaster, the impact of disaster on women on their vulnerabilities as well as the efforts to address such vulnerabilities. Likewise, a view on the impact of the aspects of vulnerability of women to national security (human security) will be discussed.

Major Issues

A. Role of Women During a Disaster

The concept of vulnerability of women in disaster situations have solicited significant attention in view of the growing number of cases of physical abuse and harm to women specifically in refugee centers. The government and other stakeholders have likewise noticed the different aspects of vulnerability of women and recognized the important role that women play during situations.

It is during this situation that women are burdened with the central parental role to secure relief from emergency authorities, meet the survival needs of the family, and identify and manage the temporary evacuation sites. Women are considered agents of change in times of disaster as they are given the responsibility to provide care, water, and food for households that supports the recovery of victims.⁵ These are, however, responsibilities dictated by stereotypical and prevailing gender roles implied by society. Nonetheless, this responsibility given to women is an opportunity to address certain gender inequalities. As the need for women in recovery efforts are recognized, policies to include women in planning for disaster response should then be implemented. These would then institutionalize the role of women as equal partner in recovery efforts.

Demands on women in post-disaster care giving setting have extended thereby affecting their emotional being. Notably, women are affected differently from men during disasters. Notwithstanding these realities, women have shown strong leadership especially in determining sustainable recovery and reconstruction across different phases of recovery. By helping in the organization of community responses, identifying new sources of income, and taking initiative in demanding improvements administered by local officials, they were able to bring the populace back to normal community life during the disaster.

B. Impacts of Disaster on Women

Women, men, girls, and boys experience the difficult impact of a disaster differently. These experiences are mostly based on their situation prior to disaster.⁶ The chaos that follows the occurrence of a disaster such as a typhoon adding to the lack of job opportunities has escalated the issue of sex trafficking and violence. The chaotic environment of a post disaster situation provides certain opportunities for criminals to exploit women and children to be trafficked, to be in forced labor, and sexual exploitation. Further, women experience struggle during disaster through factors such as food, shelter, and health concerns.

1. Food shortage – during the recovery period from Typhoon Haiyan, there was a reported decrease in the number of mothers who breastfeed their children due to limited access to healthy foods for lactating mothers. Likewise, the inclusion of powdered milk in the distribution of relief operations is often forgotten. Furthermore, women, with the assigned gender role to cook are usually the ones who struggle to find means in order to stretch the available food supply.

2. Sheltering alternatives – temporary resettlement sites (TRS) provided for families with affected homes impairs privacy and personal security for women and children. Without the capacity to pay for reconstruction of their houses, families suffer from the vulnerability of eviction and possible relocation. Likewise, the lack of information in the conduct of claiming right to shelter also hinders families in quickly recovering from the disaster.

3. Compromised health services – health services has been an issue even before the occurrence of a disaster. The inefficient delivery of health services have led to unwanted and covered miscarriages. Women report cases of suffering from gender-based violence such as bullying by service providers during birth were also reported. Furthermore, in the event of a disaster, only several municipalities have a prepared facility and capacity for mental health care. Most health care services fail to include the need for mental health care in helping victims of disaster cope with trauma and other emotional and mental impact.

4. Sexual and reproductive exacerbation – based on the study on the impact of Typhoon, conducted by Oxfam, more cases of pregnancies after the disaster – most of which involved adolescent pregnancies – were observed after the disaster. Prenatal check-ups and RH supplies were withheld from those who are not married. Cases of discrimination and bullying were also reported by young mothers from service providers as they distribute the limited number of health care facilities and supplies.

5. Lack of access to potable water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities – depleted water resources and lack of electricity contributes to the heightened issue of safety and protection for women and children. In areas affected by disaster, women and children had to fetch water supplies from distant locations. This exposes women and children to certain risks such as sexual abuse. These inconveniences have caused certain cases of death and rape of women and children.

In the face of this situation, women also experience different forms of violence such as physical violence, sexual violence, and gender-based violence (discrimination, marginalization, stereotyping, etc.). These violence reveal the heightened vulnerability of women in various aspects.

C. Women’s Vulnerabilities During Disaster

Women’s vulnerability from the impact of disasters is influenced by socially determined differences in roles and responsibilities of women and men as well as the existing inequalities between them with respect to decision-making power and access to resources.

1. Physical vulnerabilities of women usually entail domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual abuse. With the responsibility of providing basic needs such as food, shelter, and security, women and girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse in disaster situations as they may be coerced into sex in exchange for such necessities. The most influential factor in the vulnerability of women and girls in this aspect is being internally displaced in the community while struggling for resources.

Gender-based violence cases such as human trafficking and prostitution have been prevalent. However, actual occurrences are reputed

by most citizens during data gathering activities of researchers and journalist from the private and government sector. This is just one of the protection issues surrounding disaster-related sexual incidence that may lead to toleration of such events.

In the survey conducted by the National Demographic Health Survey in 2013, it presented cases of women that suffered from physical violence are higher in Regions II and XIII. Further, it was shown that married women or those living together with their partners suffers the most physical violence. Likewise, the same report presents that cases of sexual violence with the highest number of reports in the National Capital Region (NCR) followed by Region IVA (CALABARZON).⁷

According to the assessment of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) on the vulnerabilities of women and children exposed to disaster (the Philippine Experience), 12 percent of the affected 10,701 barangays in the Central Philippines reported an increase in sexual violence after the onslaught of Typhoon Yolanda. Further, before and after the Typhoon Yolanda, 96 percent of the barangays reported that more girls and boys are affected by sexual violence.⁸

Furthermore, it was reported that most cases of violence against women and children are related to financial problems and are likewise related to the inefficiency of response of the Local Government Units (LGUs) during disaster situations. With this financial concern, people are more vulnerable and are more likely to consider risky jobs with higher offers.

In addition to that, most women are hesitant to report cases of gender-based violence since most of them are financially dependent and are often pressured by societal judgments. Victims are often ashamed of exposing their experience which they tends to dismiss, also as a result of their loss of faith in the country’s justice system.⁹

In a general report of violence against women, specifically girls under 18 years old, 3,168 girls experienced abuse; 1,149 girls were abandoned and neglected; and 1,157 girls were sexually abused, 448 of which involved incest.¹⁰ Furthermore, treating pregnant women in post-disaster situation pose certain difficulties due to lack

of access to skilled birth attendants and safe birth giving facilities. In the case of Typhoon Yolanda, 15 percent of the 900 affected women giving birth everyday experienced life threatening complications.¹¹

Attending to their responsibilities of providing evacuation warnings and maintaining day-to-day family and community lives, accessing recovery resources is difficult. Alongside physical stress, women are more likely to experience a decline in their psychological well-being.

2. Psychological responses to disaster involves short-term effects such as shock, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and guilt.¹² These are usually brought about by the immense feeling of vulnerability, coping abilities, and worthlessness. Several studies have determined that a greater proportion of women and girls suffer from emotional disorders and distress as compared to men and boys.

Vulnerability is also influenced by the psychological persistence of women in their effort to survive. The gender division of roles of women have influenced their struggle to earn income by engaging in various available work no matter how risky it may be. Furthermore, women's struggle with their expanded caregiving role during disaster situations can cause a decline in their emotional well-being.

3. Social consequence for women during disasters is being burdened with greater responsibilities, especially in view of their role during the recovery period. Women face augmented social and economic problems during disaster and emergencies. Being plagued with poverty, low levels of ownership of land and other productive assets may leave women in such hardship.

Through the analysis of connecting gender and poverty in the context of humanitarian emergency reveals the specific perpetuated vulnerability status of women. In most developing countries, women's limited access to formal employment and then their experience in domestic labor involves unpaid work. Hence, this leads to the assumption that women are less trained and experienced than men in forms of formal employment. Therefore, when disaster and emergencies occur, the economic capacity of

women make it difficult for them to assume roles in humanitarian relief operations.¹³ For instance, during training on Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM), there are less women who participate as they have the primary responsibility of looking after their children.

Women are known to live longer than men. However, it is a fact that disaster lowers women's life expectancy more than men as assessed from the data of countries affected by disaster between 1981 and 2002.¹⁴ Likewise, women and children are more likely to die during a disaster.

D. Role of the Government

According to the Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), they have not witnessed the immediate response of government authorities during disaster situations. It is alarming that the government inaction and inefficient action towards disaster pose as a dangerous backdrop as it may cause the outbreak of more cases of violence against women and children. The Center for Women Resources (CWR) reported that rescue and relief operations were slow during the Typhoon Yolanda recovery despite the pour of international assistance. Likewise, in the prioritization of maintaining peace and order, policemen and military were first deployed during the recovery operation which delayed the delivery of relief services and goods.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the Philippine is considered to be part of the top ten countries in the world in terms of gender equality. The Philippine government ensures protection through the prevention and elimination of forms of gender-based violence on its citizens. A number of laws and provision were passed to ensure the protection of women from violence and the participation of men in the pursuance of this endeavor in certain government programs.

The passage of Republic Act 9262, otherwise known as the Ant-Violence Against Women (VAW) Act of 2004 was one of the greatest accomplishments of the Philippines government in addressing issues of VAW. In addition to that, the Philippine government passed a comprehensive women's rights law that would eliminate discrimination against women known as Republic Act 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women of 2009.

However, despite the enactment of the Magna Carta of Women in 2009 that mandates the government to ensure the protection of women from all forms of violence, there still perceives to be a great number of women suffering from violent acts usually highlighted during disaster.

During the disaster caused by Typhoon Yolanda, there were reports by survivors that the relief operations right after the disaster involved more of the deployment of police and military with the objective to “keep peace and order” rather than to bring foods and medicines. Though the situation made a smoother process of deployment of foreign aid in the country, relief operations were very slow despite the large number of the local and international aid. ¹⁶

Furthermore, the planning management and recovery groups of disaster response operations are mostly led by men thus operating through the eyes of men and do not completely acknowledge gender differences and women’s specific needs into consideration such as sanitary napkins, feminine wash, and milk and vitamins for pregnant women.

Some Policy Considerations

Given that these vulnerabilities are simply heightened during disaster, it must be addressed from the roots which is the economic standing of women pre-disaster. Therefore, this paper proposes two policy considerations in addressing this matter: (1) women’s economic empowerment and (2) gender-responsive governance.

1. Women’s Economic Empowerment. The socially imposed gender responsibility of women in their family leads to dependency and a shortfall in decision-making and economic empowerment. Access and control of productive resources and results of wealth-creating careers are important factors for the independence of both women and men. However, as the Philippine government is still continuing its efforts to implement the law and institutionalize gender-responsive practices, a review of existing economic programs for women should be considered. Likewise, a focus on the employment of women beyond the metropolitan area such as in other provinces should be given attention.

Women are highly depended on for their care giving roles that goes beyond caring for the family and the children during times of disaster. However, these labors are highly unpaid, therefore, it is recommended that women in every area of the country are given skills training, trainer’s training position, and operations staff designation that would capacitate their care giving skills during disaster recovery and rehabilitation operations. This would provide women with a substantive and a wealth creating role during before, during, and after a disaster.

Likewise, the government can build on the skills of women in terms of local market needs that would still be applicable during disaster recovery operations. This way, women can be provided with the best chance for sustainable income. By providing women with economic opportunities they can be protected from sexual exploitation brought by the desperation in the need for economic resources.

“We need to capacitate women not only as primary caregivers in times of disaster and economic distress, but also as part of the overall strategy on disaster risk reduction and management. To empower women is to reduce their vulnerability to disasters.”

Senator Loren Legarda

2. Gender-Responsive Governance. One of the challenges in addressing cases of gender-based violence, especially during disaster and emergency situations, is the limited acknowledgement of the government and the society of VAW. Therefore, in the issue of the recurring gender-based violence in humanitarian emergencies, it is important to further raise awareness that these are public issues of national concern. Therefore, a gender-responsive governance system is recommended to improve the overall inclusion of women not only in DRRM but in the decision-making of the nation. The law already provides the mandate for a shared responsibility in the inclusion of women in the decision-making process in all levels of society, hence, it needs only to be strengthened.

On a broader level, a gender-responsive governance would cover all levels of society such as economic, administrative, and even political affairs

that would ensure the participation of women. Therefore, the main policy consideration would be the enforcement of strict compliance to the Republic Act 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women (MCW) focusing on the equal participation of women and men in the decision-making process of the country. For example, the hindrance of some government agencies in the implementation of the MCW is the lack of the Implementing Guidelines, Rules, and Regulations (IGRR). The creation of an IGRR will tailor-fit the implementation of the MCW to the implementing agencies thus would suggest efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion

The concept of survival and disaster risk differ for women, men, girls, and boys. It must be noted that there is a higher number of gender-based violence during disaster situation. It is accepted that due to the different social and legal status of women from men, in terms of jurisdiction and authority, women have less access to material and social goods to protect themselves from the impact of disaster.

Endnotes

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- ⁷ National Demographic Health Survey Philippines 2013. (<https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR294/FR294.pdf>)
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The vulnerability experienced by women physically, psychologically, and socially are observed in a quick analysis of their conditions on areas of disaster. Similar to how disasters go beyond geography, culture, sex, and gender, the occurrence of violence goes beyond the occurrence of a disaster. Victims of disasters are highly emotionally compromised that tends to lead to desperation. Human trafficking cases and other gender-based violence are sometimes done out of desperation for food and shelter to the point that victims would engage in the concept of sex-for-food exchange. The vulnerabilities faced by women are of national concern that does not fall solely as the responsibility of the government but of the entire nation.

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