



# **ON THE FRONTLINE: CATALYSING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION**

Prepared for the World Humanitarian Summit, 2016, Turkey

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Women gather at the 'Blue Tent' set up by ActionAid on the island of Erromango in Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam. Photo: ActionAid.

Cover: Volunteers clear rubble and save bricks from heritage buildings in Patan Durban Square, which were heavily damaged by the earthquake. Photo: Vlad Sokhin/ActionAid.

# CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction</b> .....	7
Methodology .....	9
<b>A male dominated and gender blind humanitarian system</b> .....	10
Balancing women and girls' vulnerability and empowerment .....	10
The case for women's leadership: an end and a means for more effective outcomes .....	11
Obstacles to mainstreaming gender equality and women's leadership .....	12
Structural and relational barriers for women's leadership in emergencies .....	12
<b>Barriers And Opportunities For Women's Leadership In Humanitarian Response</b> .....	14
Findings from consultations with women affected by humanitarian crises .....	14
The Case Studies .....	14
Barriers To Women's Leadership In Humanitarian Response .....	16
Women's lack of representation in decision-making .....	16
Women's burden of unpaid work .....	20
Awareness, education, capacity and confidence .....	21
Poverty and access to resources .....	22
Patriarchal attitudes and gender norms .....	23
<b>Opportunities For Women's Leadership In Humanitarian Response</b> .....	24
Recognising women's existing leadership .....	24
Building on existing social networks, skills and capabilities .....	26
Investing in women's leadership of emergency preparedness and resilience building .....	27
Supporting women's mobilising and organising efforts .....	28
Transformations in gender relations through new roles for women .....	30
Increasing women's economic empowerment and access to resources .....	32
Engaging with men in transforming gender relations .....	32
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	33
1. Women's Priorities For Action .....	33
1) Invest in strengthening women's leadership capacity – particularly in risk reduction and emergency preparedness .....	33
2) Facilitate women's leadership in community decision-making structures .....	34
3) Build upon women's existing leadership in response efforts .....	35
4) Address the practical barriers to women's leadership: time and money .....	35
2. Recommendations For Humanitarian System Reform .....	36

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 provides a unique opportunity for governments, UN agencies and civil society actors to set an ambitious agenda for empowering women and girls as change agents and leaders in humanitarian action and ensuring gender responsive humanitarian programming. However for these commitments to translate into meaningful action, it is critical to respond to the barriers that currently impact women's leadership in emergencies, and build upon the existing efforts of women first responders and women-led organisations. ActionAid has produced this paper to ensure commitments arising from the World Humanitarian Summit are grounded in the realities of women affected by humanitarian crises and reflect their priorities.

Climate change has brought many challenges for these communities in Faridpur, Bangladesh. However, ActionAid's work to help them adapt to flooding, erratic temperatures and rainfall, and to self-organise to demand their rights from local government, have enabled them to become more resilient. "We used to eat half rice, half sand," says Nurjahan Begum, the committee vice chair (blue sari). "With this project, we now have healthy soils, grass, protection from the sun, and a place to graze our cows and goats." Photo: Teresa Anderson/ActionAid.



This paper draws together findings from focus group discussions with women from multiple regions and draws upon ActionAid's experience from a range of humanitarian contexts, including rapid and slow onset disasters and protracted crisis. It presents the barriers and opportunities for women's leadership in humanitarian response as identified by women from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, occupied Palestinian territory (Gaza), the Philippines and Vanuatu. This data is overlaid with available evidence to validate the findings and demonstrate their applicability across diverse contexts.

Women have a fundamental right to participate in and influence the decisions and institutions that affect their lives. These rights are embedded in a number of international legal frameworks, including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1996); the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998); UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 (2000); UNSCR 1820 (2008); and UNSCR 1889 (2009). ActionAid recognises that while women are disproportionately affected by emergencies, humanitarian crises also create potential spaces to challenge the status quo, and build back better in ways that transform gender relations and empower women over the longer term. By examining the potential for women's leadership in humanitarian action, this paper aims to contribute to effective actions that will catalyse this change. Advancing women's leadership in emergencies is a central pillar of ActionAid's Human Rights Based Approach in emergencies, recognising that disasters and conflict increase women's vulnerability to violations and denial of human rights, including exclusion from decision-making and access to resources.

The research confirms that women bring invaluable contextual knowledge, skills, resources and experiences to emergency preparedness, response and resilience building, contributing to the emerging evidence base that women's leadership contributes to better disaster preparedness and risk reduction; more efficient and effective humanitarian response; and inclusive and sustainable peace building and conflict resolution in communities. However, consistent with the findings of ActionAid's South Asian Women's Resilience Index the conceptualisation of women as victims of disasters, alongside other barriers, has precluded them from being considered as active agents in humanitarian action and fulfilment of their right to equal participation.

Women report experiencing numerous socio-cultural and economic barriers to exercising their agency and leadership in humanitarian crises. These barriers include patriarchal gender attitudes and norms that restrict women's participation in public space and undermine their contribution as leaders; women's burden of unpaid work; a lack of experience and opportunities to participate in leadership and exclusion from emergency response decision-making structures; low self-confidence; poverty and access to resources; and low levels of education and literacy.

There are a number of opportunities to build on women's existing skills, capacities and leadership in times of crisis and beyond to transform women's status in society. Key strategies identified through the research include investing in women's leadership in emergency preparedness and resilience building; utilising women's unique skills and knowledge in humanitarian response; supporting women's mobilising and organising efforts; increasing women's access to resources through targeted economic empowerment programming; better collection of gender disaggregated data; distributing resources directly to women and their organisations; and raising awareness of women's rights in communities.

Based on the direct input from women in disaster and conflict affected communities across five countries, ActionAid proposes the following recommendations for governments, UN agencies and civil society actors in taking forward commitments under the United Nations Secretary General's *Agenda for Humanity* focused on empowering women and girls:

**1. Ensure direct funding to local and national women's organisations to support their efforts to create safe spaces for women to organise and mobilise in emergencies, and actively engage in crisis response, including resourcing for core operations and advocacy work.**

**2. Scale up training opportunities for local women leaders in emergency preparedness, early warning and response, and other priorities identified by women (e.g. functional literacy) that will facilitate their increased engagement and leadership in humanitarian action.**

**3. Commit to gender parity in all community-level, national and international representation structures overseeing emergency preparedness and response, establishing targets, removing barriers to participation and ensuring adequate training and support for women to participate equally with men.**

**4. Establish a mechanism within the UN humanitarian coordination system that focuses explicitly on overseeing gender equality in humanitarian responses, including facilitating the direct involvement of local and national women's organisations.**

**5. Recognise the burden of unpaid work on women's participation and leadership in humanitarian action and consult with women as part of preparedness and response planning about practical mechanisms that can redistribute this burden (e.g. child care services, financial support, child-inclusive spaces).**

**6. Commit to long-term engagement to support women's leadership capacity and resilience building, including women's social and economic empowerment, alongside short-term emergency response initiatives recognising the time that is required to shift power and entrenched gender inequalities and discrimination.**

**7. Improve gender and age disaggregated data in rapid needs assessment and ensure women are part of data collection, analysis and response decision-making to ensure that humanitarian response is targeted to women's diverse needs.**

**8. Ensure protection from violence against women is prioritised at the onset of each emergency response, including resourcing of women's groups to identify and respond to protection risks as a key strategy in developing sustainable community based protection mechanisms .**

# INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a growing number of disasters, greater unpredictability resulting from climate change, more protracted conflicts, and increasingly complex emergencies. As of July 2015, an estimated 114 million people in assessed countries<sup>1</sup> were in need of humanitarian assistance, compared to 40 million just over ten years ago.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the vast increase in the number of people affected by humanitarian crises, the nature of these crises is becoming increasingly complex and protracted, leaving people vulnerable and in need of humanitarian action for decades, and in some cases generations.<sup>3</sup> There is also growing evidence<sup>4</sup> of the disproportionate impact on emergencies on women and girls. Disasters kill more women than men. The risk of violence against women increases in conflict and times of disaster, alongside maternal morbidity and mortality with sixty per cent of women who die in pregnancy and childbirth found in crisis zones globally.

The complexity and volume of humanitarian crises is challenging the international humanitarian system, which was designed to rapidly respond to exceptional circumstances.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the current humanitarian system is structurally ill-equipped to respond to the needs of affected populations efficiently and in a timely fashion.<sup>6</sup> Consistent with ActionAid's longstanding focus on shifting the power to local actors in humanitarian response, there are increasing calls from Southern governments and NGOs to devolve more of the response to the national and local levels.<sup>7</sup> Not only should increased localisation strengthen accountability to affected populations but there is also clear evidence that locally-led responses can be more efficient and effective as local organisations are able to respond more quickly and stay longer than international actors as well as having superior understanding of the local context and greater access to affected populations. Within this context, the capacity and knowledge of local women's organisations is not being fully utilised with only one per cent of all funding to fragile states in 2015 going to women's groups or government ministries of women.<sup>8</sup>

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Turkey offers a unique moment in history where stakeholders from governments, the United Nations (UN) system and multilateral agencies, as well as civil society will come together and collectively commit to a forward-looking agenda for humanitarian action to address future challenges.



Gujuji Dekama, late 60s, at her home where she is helping to store relief food for the drought in Saba Boru woreda. Photo: ActionAid.

In preparation for the Summit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has released a report, entitled '*One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*', which provides key actions and strategic shifts that are imperative for the humanitarian community to respond to the number, severity and complexity of crises the world is facing. The Report contains five core responsibilities for action by UN Member States: global leadership to prevent and end conflict; upholding the norms that protect humanity; leaving no one behind; moving from delivering aid to ending need; and investing in humanity. While gender equality is a cross-cutting theme across all five core responsibilities of *Agenda for Humanity*, women's empowerment and leadership is strongly embedded in core responsibility three: *Leave no one behind*. The section on *Empower and Protect Women and Girls* includes the following proposed commitments:

- **Implement and adequately resource policies and programmes that aim for women and girls' full and equal participation in decision-making at all levels**
- **Hold all actors to account for integrating the specific needs of women and girls and ensuring women and girls' agency is empowered in national and international development and humanitarian programming and funding**
- **Guarantee access to sustainable and dignified livelihoods and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services**
- **Increase substantially funding to local women's organisations<sup>9</sup>**

The World Humanitarian Summit is an opportunity for the international humanitarian community to set a course for a more transformative, gender-inclusive agenda for humanitarian response in the future. It is an unprecedented moment to shift the power, bringing humanitarian resources and decision-making closer to those in greatest need. This includes shifting the power from North to South, international to local and from a male dominated system to one where women play a more central role. ActionAid advocates for greater attention to women's rights in emergencies and a more localised response that facilitates shifts in power, resources and gender relations to 'build back better' in ways that go beyond material improvements or technical solutions.

ActionAid believes that basic needs are basic rights, including in humanitarian contexts. When emergencies strike, the organisation works to ensure people's immediate needs – such as for food, water, shelter and protection – are met. At the same time, its response builds local capacity and empowers the most vulnerable, laying the foundations for long term interventions aimed at addressing underlying inequalities and building resilience. Promoting women's rights and leadership is central to ActionAid's humanitarian programming, alongside accountability to disaster and conflict affected communities and embedding emergency response within broader development and resilience building initiatives.

In preparation for the Summit, ActionAid has undertaken consultations with women from crisis-affected communities, specifically women living in poverty and from marginalised groups, to document the barriers and opportunities for women's leadership in humanitarian action. Drawing on this research, this paper examines how the global humanitarian system must be transformed to bring humanitarian resources and decision-making closer to the women and girls who have been most affected so that women can define their priorities and appropriate responses.



# Methodology

The primary research methodology used was structured focus groups discussions with women in five countries across different emergency contexts where Action Aid is engaged in humanitarian response and longer-term development. This includes responses to recent rapid onset disasters including the earthquake in Nepal (2015) and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2014); recurrent flooding and disaster in Bangladesh including Cyclone Mahasen (2013); slow onset and protracted crisis in Ethiopia, where the effects of El Nino are being felt through food insecurity and drought; and an escalation in the protracted crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory, with the 2014 war in Gaza. In total, 193 women participated in this research through 16 focus group discussions and four in-depth interviews. Of the 193 women consulted, 66 were young women and 35 were identified as being at risk of compounded vulnerability/marginalisation, such as women with disabilities, women heads of households, displaced women, elderly women, widows and Indigenous women.

This report also draws on data collected in the evaluation of Action Aid's Women-Led Protection Programme in Vanuatu, the cornerstone of the organisation's response to Cyclone Pam (2015), as well as a consultation with ActionAid humanitarian staff from Australia, Bangladesh, India and the occupied Palestinian territory as well as the International Humanitarian and Resilience Team (IHART). In addition, findings from ActionAid's South Asia Women's Resilience Index (WRI), produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit, have been used to supplement primary data, alongside a review of available literature.



the Philippines; Nenang, a community member mapping the impact the work has had on her community. Photo: ActionAid

# A MALE DOMINATED AND GENDER BLIND HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

## Balancing women and girls' vulnerability and empowerment

Women and girls suffer disproportionately during humanitarian emergencies. Crises have a detrimental impact on the informal economy and on agricultural trade where women are generally over-represented; rapid onset disasters kill more women than men, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, which resulted in the death of four women to every one man in India and Sri Lanka;<sup>10</sup> and all forms of violence against women and girls are exacerbated during humanitarian crises, especially during conflict where gender-based violence affects over 70 per cent of women in some crisis settings. Moreover, women can be more adversely affected than men in the emergency relief and recovery efforts. For example, social customs limiting women's mobility and access to public spaces can mean that women do not receive relief items and aid during a crisis. Gender inequalities are compounded during humanitarian crises, leaving many women more vulnerable in emergencies and less able to access life-saving services and decision-making that affect their lives. While the concept of gendered vulnerability is important for understanding the different ways in which women and men are affected by disasters, it must not be forgotten that there is nothing natural about this vulnerability. Rather, it is caused by the social and economic disadvantage that women experience as a result of socially constructed gender roles, systematic discrimination against women and the power imbalance between women and men.

While it is important to understand women's vulnerability during humanitarian crises, it is also vital to avoid stereotyping women as inherently vulnerable, passive recipients of humanitarian assistance and protection. Women bring vital skills, resources and experience to humanitarian response and have a fundamental right to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. Women are among the first responders to a crisis, taking risks and playing critical roles in the survival of families and communities. Women are often responsible for the care and emotional rebuilding of communities in the aftermath of a crisis and they often have strong local knowledge and links with others in the area where they live, which is a critical resource during humanitarian response.<sup>12</sup> When women are engaged in defining the relief packages and support mechanisms required in their community, this can facilitate a more rapid response and recovery. In addition to this, women in some contexts are engaged in labour which they were previously excluded from and might have been seen as 'man's work' prior to the emergency, such as rebuilding houses and ploughing or clearing land. This is particularly the case when husbands and sons are lost in disasters or conflict, or they migrate in the aftermath of a crisis to earn remittance income.<sup>13</sup>

While there is a growing body of evidence that violence against women increases in times of crises, the increased risk or threat of violence may not be immediately visible in the emergency response period or may play out in the private sphere. Yet protection from violence against women is poorly resourced as part of the broader humanitarian response and is given lower priority than the more seemingly pressing and visible needs in emergencies. However women's safety and security affects their participation and engagement in humanitarian action, which makes it critical to ensure their basic needs are met, particularly around protection, to reduce vulnerability and support women's empowerment.

## The case for women's leadership: an end and a means for more effective outcomes

Gender-sensitive humanitarian response must go beyond responding to the needs and vulnerabilities of women by recognising and facilitating women's voice, representation and participation in decision-making through inclusive and targeted strategies. It is an urgent human rights imperative and part of international commitments taken by Governments worldwide for the full realisation of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Women have a fundamental right to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives, which is embedded in the international legal framework, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1996); UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998); and UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1889 (2009).

Women's participation in decision-making is not only a fundamental human right but there is a strong empirical evidence base that women's leadership contributes to better emergency preparedness and risk reduction; more efficient and effective humanitarian response; and inclusive and sustainable peace building and conflict resolution in communities. A recent study commissioned by ActionAid demonstrates that women's knowledge of their local environment and their proven skills in community mobilisation positions them to be transformational agents in emergency preparedness and building resilience, and that women's leadership can enhance humanitarian response to the benefit of communities.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, recent UN Women research<sup>15</sup> measuring the effect of gender equality programming on humanitarian outcomes in four contexts found that gender-responsive humanitarian programming, which includes "*women's perceived power to influence the delivery of the service*", is correlated with improvements in access to education and positive education outcomes for boys and girls; improved access to health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) outcomes, particularly for women and girls, but extending to all household members; improved food access and food security, particularly among women and children; and improved gender equality in humanitarian settings. Opening up space for women's participation and their leadership in decision making bodies in humanitarian response and recovery also raises aspirations among women and girls from the local to the international level. This contributes to further gender power transformations, gradually reducing women's historical exclusion from accessing power.

## Obstacles to mainstreaming gender equality and women's leadership

The critical need to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women in humanitarian response is well established and is embedded in a range of humanitarian policy frameworks and conventions, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015); the Sustainable Development Goals (2015); and a raft of UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. In practice however, the humanitarian system has failed to mainstream a gender perspective and as a result, the needs, capacities and rights of women are not given adequate consideration in humanitarian response planning and implementation.<sup>16</sup> In first place, there are structural constraints in the system. For example, there is no gender cluster within the humanitarian coordination system, and the cluster system has failed to consistently integrate women's rights and gender equality measures. In practice, gender issues sit within the Protection Cluster, along with children and other vulnerable groups. This reduces women to victims of humanitarian crises, and further perpetuates patriarchal justifications for excluding women from leadership. Further, international humanitarian actors (including the UN, donors and NGO's) reflect and reinforce gender inequalities in society with practices deeply rooted in an unequal gender hierarchy. According to the 2011 Humanitarian Response Index, the ratio of two thirds men and one third women as senior managers in humanitarian organisations has remained largely unchanged since the report was first launched in 2007.<sup>17</sup> This manifests in low representation of women in humanitarian leadership, conflict resolution and peace-building processes, and practices that favour hierarchical structures, individualism, and competition as opposed to cooperative or consultative ways of working.<sup>18</sup> As of January 2016, there are 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators globally and only 9 of these are women.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, one of the most significant barriers to women's leadership in humanitarian response is a lack of funds to support gender responsive humanitarian action and local women's rights organisations. This is linked to the patriarchal culture in decision-making structures within the humanitarian system. Research shows that the budget allocated to policy commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment significantly falls short of that necessary to meet the stated goals. While the rhetoric on integrating gender equality into humanitarian response is strong, a review of humanitarian programmes in the Financial Tracking System (FTS) of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) showed that between 2011 and 2014, less than two percent of all humanitarian programmes in the system had the explicit goal of advancing gender equality or taking targeted action for women and girls.<sup>20</sup> It is common for national disaster coordination offices to also lack the organisational and human capacity to identify and address women's rights issues and gender gaps in humanitarian programmes. Funding is not only a barrier to gender responsive programming at the international level, but there are few opportunities for local actors to access funding directly through the international humanitarian system, creating an additional obstacle for local women's organisations seeking to lead humanitarian response in their communities. According to the OECD,<sup>21</sup> only one per cent of all funding to fragile states in 2015 went to women's groups or government ministries of women.

### Where's the money? Funding locally led responses through the humanitarian system

There is evidence that locally-led responses can be more efficient and effective because local actors can draw on local knowledge, access affected populations more easily, and stay longer than international actors<sup>22</sup>, yet local and national NGOs receive a minute percentage of available humanitarian funds. Between 2010 and 2014, local and national NGOs combined received 0.3% of the total assistance reported to the UN OCHA FTS over the period, and this has been declining in recent years. In 2014, according to the UN OCHA FTS, only 16 local NGOs received funding directly through this mechanism. While it is certain that substantially more local NGOs accessed funding more indirectly, such as through partnerships with INGOs, this data is not systematically captured.

The gap between existing standards and their practice remains vast in providing assistance and protection to support women and girls claim their rights and fulfil their needs in a crisis.<sup>23</sup> Despite the emergent evidence-base that gender equality programming improves humanitarian outcomes, particularly for the poorest and most marginalised people, many interventions remain gender-blind, with the data collected rarely disaggregated by sex and age and no formal monitoring of its use or accountability for inconsistent application. For example, 2013-2014 data from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Marker,<sup>24</sup> which assessed the gender-responsiveness of 1800 projects, indicates a decrease of 27 per cent compared to the previous year of projects that included a gender analysis of the different needs of women and men and mainstreamed these into project planning. This coincided with an increase of 130 per cent of projects which are considered gender blind at the planning stage.<sup>25</sup> Further, a May 2015 review of the IASC's 2008 Gender Equality Policy found that the IASC has been inconsistent in ensuring that the coordinated humanitarian system adequately integrates gender equality and women's empowerment, including through the use of sex and age disaggregated data and crisis-context gender analysis in developing humanitarian response plans.<sup>26</sup> This means that response strategies and resource allocation are not being informed by accurate information on the numbers of women that have been affected by the crises, how the crises have impacted them and their support and resource needs.

Finally, despite 15 years of a global commitment to women's participation in peace building, between 1992 to 2011 women only made up 9% of negotiators in formal peace processes and 2% of chief mediators.<sup>27</sup> Women's activism and contributions are consistently devalued, sexual and gender-based violence remains widespread, and 'women's issues' continue to be treated as marginal to the main peacebuilding agenda.<sup>28</sup>

## **Structural and relational barriers for women's leadership in emergencies**

On top of the structural and financial obstacles that exist in the humanitarian system, women also face numerous socio-cultural and economic barriers in their countries and communities to exercising agency and leadership in emergency preparedness, response and resilience programming<sup>29</sup> These include deep structural and relational barriers to participation and being recognised as leaders, including but not limited to cultural norms, men's attitudes and the burden of unpaid care.<sup>30</sup> These include deep structural and relational barriers to participation and being recognised as leaders, including but not limited to cultural norms, men's attitudes and the burden of unpaid work. Patriarchal cultural bias of local men and humanitarian workers is commonly cited as a major barrier to women's leadership in humanitarian action.<sup>31</sup> Humanitarian staff commonly reinforce these existing power imbalances by only engaging those in decision-making roles within the community, usually men. In some cases, humanitarian staff actively resist integrating a gender lens into their work because it is not seen as a priority consideration among the plethora of urgent needs.<sup>32</sup> For example, it is common that only male leaders are consulted to provide 'local knowledge' to planners and implementers of emergency responses. This approach reinforces existing power imbalances by diminishing the value of women's knowledge and providing men with important access to the humanitarian system.<sup>33</sup>

As seen in the previous section, the UN cluster system has failed to consistently integrate a gender perspective and therefore does little to address these barriers to women's access and participation with its role in coordinating humanitarian responses among UN agencies, INGOs and national disaster management authorities. International experts, including in gender, are given greater influence over resources and decision-making than women's local knowledge and expertise, which is often dismissed or not actively sought out.

Clearly the power imbalances evident in the humanitarian system mirror and sometimes reinforce the broader gender inequalities experienced by women living in poverty, and manifest in unequal access to decision-making and resources.

# **BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE:**

## **Findings from consultations with women affected by humanitarian crises**

This section reports on ActionAid's research into the barriers and opportunities for women's leadership in humanitarian response as identified by women from crisis affected communities through focus group discussions in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Palestine and the Philippines. It also draws on data collected by ActionAid through other means including the evaluation of Action Aid's Women-Led Protection Program in Vanuatu and the South Asia Women's Resilience Index; a study commissioned by ActionAid to assesses countries' capacity for disaster risk reduction and recovery and the extent to which the needs of women are being integrated into national resilience-building efforts.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Case Studies**

Ethiopia and Palestine are both experiencing protracted crises. Ethiopia is experiencing a severe drought due to El Nino weather conditions that has resulted in mass water and food shortages, and Gaza has been subjected to violent occupation and conflict for generations, which escalated in violence with the 2014 Gaza war. Bangladesh, the Philippines and Nepal on the other hand have all experienced rapid-onset disasters over recent years. Women's leadership in these humanitarian responses differed markedly across case studies. The data clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted women's leadership strategies in addressing barriers to women's leadership. The experiences of women in Bangladesh and the Philippines where ActionAid facilitated standalone women's leadership initiatives are markedly different to the experiences of women in Nepal, Gaza and Ethiopia. Women consulted in Bangladesh and Philippines reflected on their experience leading humanitarian response and spoke of barriers that hindered their leadership. Women in Ethiopia identified their lack of education, literacy and the burden of unpaid work as the most significant factors hindering their leadership; and women from Nepal stressed that their leadership is impacted by poverty and economic dependence on their husbands.

Women's leadership in Palestine is quite different from the other case studies. Because of the protracted nature of the conflict in Gaza, over time some gender norms have shifted out of necessity to allow women to contribute to the survival of their families and communities. Women have become adept at working together and utilising their collective skills to address priorities during crises. Women consulted from Gaza also reported that the greatest barrier is that their leadership is not recognised by humanitarian actors and institutions, which limits their leadership to informal spaces.

Women's experiences also vary significantly within countries and communities, based on their position in society and their experiences of discrimination and marginalisation among other factors. Particular groups of women, including women with disabilities, women of different ages from youth to elderly, women of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, women living in extreme poverty, and women with lower hierarchical status in caste systems (such as Dalit women in India) often experience additional barriers to realising their rights, including their right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. The intersectionality of multiple forms of discrimination can drastically intensify women's marginalisation from leadership in humanitarian action. For example, women with disabilities face additional physical and communication barriers to participating in public meetings and decision-making forums, which silences and excludes them from leadership. Yet the specific needs of women with disabilities and their families are rarely considered in planning, implementing and monitoring of humanitarian response.<sup>35</sup> Women with disabilities offer unique knowledge and skills, which will be essential to removing barriers to aid and achieving the UN's commitment to "leave no-one behind."



Worker at Union of Health Care Committees (UHCC) - an AA partner helping us deliver vouchers. Photo: Natasha Mulder.

## **BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

Focus groups discussions in the selected countries highlight significant barriers that need to be overcome for women to strengthen their leadership and participation in humanitarian response. Women's exclusion from formal decision-making structures and processes continues to limit the space for them to lead. This lack of opportunity further limits women's awareness, capacity and confidence to engage equally with men in humanitarian action. Women's unequal share of unpaid work also limits the time and resources women have available to engage in leadership. Poverty further compounds the situation severely restricting women's material and non-material resources and necessitating that urgent survival needs take precedence over women raising their voices through community engagement. Gender norms and attitudes create further barriers to participation restricting women's mobility and access to public space and decision-making in some contexts. These barriers are all manifestations of patriarchy, and widespread gender inequalities and discrimination that are evidenced across all countries.

### **Women's lack of representation in decision-making**

Around the world women are significantly underrepresented in decision-making and leadership at all levels of society. This is even more pronounced in highly patriarchal contexts, such as the five country case studies included in this research. The research reaffirmed that women face considerable barriers to participating in community decision-making and leadership, including patriarchal gender norms that limit women's participation in public space; discriminatory practices and negative attitudes towards women's leadership; the burden of unpaid work; and structural barriers, such as government policies or laws, and working hours.

Women's lack of representation in decision-making has a number of flow-on effects that limit women's leadership in humanitarian response. First, because women are excluded from the community decision-making structures that exist prior to the emergency, there are few opportunities for them to build understanding of decision-making processes and systems and to strengthen their leadership skills and confidence as leaders. As a result, women in a number of consultations, including in Ethiopia and Nepal, reported that they did not have the confidence to participate in decision-making or leadership during the humanitarian response.

Importantly, even when women are represented in decision-making structures, it is unlikely to result in increased influence where patriarchal values persist. Women should have opportunities to build their confidence to actively participate in and

*Mostly the relief was distributed by men. But the relief that was distributed by Action-Aid; they involved both men and women (Nepal Focus Group Discussion)*



contribute to decision-making while men need to value women's contribution and accept their decisions. Women consulted in Nepal report that while it is common for women to attend community meetings, they do not have any influence over decision-making and therefore they rarely speak up about the issues affecting them and the decisions that influence them: "They listen to us, but it doesn't come into practice... *Even if we attend, we don't speak much. Our suggestions are not taken seriously.*"

In Ethiopia, the *kebele*\* Disaster Prevention and Preparedness (DPP) Committee took the lead of the emergency response, including reporting the humanitarian crises, beneficiary screening and distribution of relief items. Only members of the kebele administration can be on the DPP committee and there is very low representation of women in kebele administration. Women consulted in one kebele reported that two women were able to participate in the DPP committee: the Women's Affairs Representative and the Health Extension Agent. Women consulted in the second kebele reported that there were no women on the DPP committee. This process effectively excludes or limits women from leadership in humanitarian response from the beginning due to its narrow criteria for participation.

\* *Neighbourhood administrative division*



Community members from our work in Afajehegn community, Ethiopia.  
Photo: Celia Peterson/ActionAid

## Reinforcing community level barriers to women's leadership in Palestine and Nepal

When humanitarian actors respond without first understanding and acknowledging the existing social, economic and cultural inequalities that marginalise women, they almost inevitably replicate and amplify these inequalities. The pervasive gender attitudes and norms that see women's roles as being restricted to the private sphere, result in women's leadership not being recognised in local and international institutions leading the humanitarian response. International humanitarian actors wield significant power when determining which members of the community they engage with and through what structures. While it is important to respect the ways of working within each context, it is critical to understand that these structures commonly exclude women and that by working solely through them, this can deepen women's marginalisation and contribute to maintaining the status quo that reflects male power and privilege. Programs that are not gender-sensitive either respond as though men and women have the same needs, vulnerabilities and capacities or base their response on assumptions and stereotypes about gender roles and capacities. For example, in Nepal women reported that international humanitarian actors either implemented the response to the 2015 earthquake through their own structures or local structures such as the Ward Citizen Forum, which were all led by men. Women reported that they were not engaged in the planning or implementation of these response efforts. However, they shared that women were actively engaged in ActionAid Nepal's response, which worked with women to distribute relief and provide information to the community.

Women consulted in Gaza reported that the humanitarian response to the Gaza conflict marginalised women from the beginning. Women reported that despite their active leadership in the informal community response to the conflict, local and international humanitarian actors did not seek to include them in the design or implementation of the emergency response as they were not part of the formal community structures. Women involved in the research expressed particular frustration that they were not consulted, nor other civil society actors, in the development of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism – the agreement between the Palestinian Authority, the Government of Israel and the UN – which controls the movement of needed construction materials for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.

The research also revealed numerous examples of humanitarian actors distributing funds and resources exclusively to men, rather than to women and men, which further entrenches men's power and control over women. In Gaza, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency provided compensation to families whose houses were demolished in the Gaza conflict. This compensation was generally provided directly to men, rather than requiring both women and men's signatures, which subsequently undermined women's participation in financial decision-making.



Women protest the imminent destruction of Susiya, a village of the West Bank. Photo: Celia Peterson/ActionAid.



Tullimaya Tamang clears the debris from where her house once stood overlooking the valley of the Palame village in the Kavrepalanchok District in Nepal. During the earthquake that struck Nepal on 29 April, she was thrown over the cliff but survived by clinging to rocks on the way down. Photo: Prashanth Vishwanathan/ActionAid.

Country emergency response mechanisms frequently exclude women from leadership roles in humanitarian response, such as the government-established Ward Citizen Forums (WCFs) in Nepal. Nepalese women report that the WCFs are mostly responsible for emergency response at the village level and since almost all WCFs are led by men, women were automatically excluded from leadership in the response. Similar experiences were reported in a number of other countries. In Vanuatu, long-held traditional customs dictate that community decisions are generally made by a council of chiefs, who are by definition male. Consequently, women were excluded from participating in decision-making and leadership in the response to Cyclone Pam. Women in Bangladesh shared that before women's involvement in the ActionAid Bangladesh Women-Led Emergency Response, they were relegated to the home, unable to participate in community decision-making and leadership.

Humanitarian response is commonly managed through these very decision-making structures, for example the government-established Ward Citizen Forums (WCFs) in Nepal, which exclude women by default from leadership roles in humanitarian response. Nepalese women reported that the WCFs were mostly responsible for emergency response at the village level and since almost all WCFs are led by men, women were automatically excluded from leadership in the response. Similar experiences were reported in a number of other countries. In Vanuatu, long-held traditional customs dictate that community decisions are generally made by a council of chiefs, who are by definition male. Consequently, women were excluded from participating in decision-making and leadership in the response to Cyclone Pam. Women in Bangladesh shared that before women's involvement in the ActionAid Bangladesh Women-Led Emergency Response, they were relegated to the home, unable to participate in community decision-making and leadership.

## Women's burden of unpaid work

The UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) recognises that women's unpaid work impacts on the fulfilment of women's rights, affecting their participation in education, employment and other activities related to their personal development. This extends to women's participation in humanitarian action.

A fundamental reason women's burden of unpaid work creates a barrier to women's participation in leadership is that the division of labour is split along private/public lines. As a result, men have greater exposure to public spaces where community decision-making takes place, while women's participation is constrained by the high burden of work privately undertaken in their homes.<sup>36</sup> This was identified as an issue in consultations in the Philippines, Nepal, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. Women reported that they were responsible for household work and caring for children and that there are few opportunities to engage in the community. Women also work longer hours than men and subsequently have less time to participate in community-level decision-making and leadership. For example, through a time use survey of men and women in Nepal, ActionAid found that women work 1.4 hours for every one hour worked by men with household work taking up most of their time.<sup>37</sup>

The impact of women's burden of unpaid work on their leadership is compounded by humanitarian crises in two key ways. Firstly, women's socially constructed role as carers tends to impose specific responsibilities on them in the aftermath of crises. Women play an important but often invisible role in caring for those most affected by the crisis. This increases the demand on their time and can also restrict their movement.<sup>38</sup> Research has shown that in some cases women have felt obliged to stay behind during a crisis to care for dependents and those

less able to leave the home, such as children, people with disabilities and the elderly.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, women's domestic and caring responsibilities are rarely considered in needs assessments or design and implementation of humanitarian response programming. This not only decreases the likelihood that the response will adequately meet the needs of women, but without consideration of these additional responsibilities, women's capacity to engage in humanitarian action is curtailed.

*Women in Ethiopia discussed how the burden of domestic and caring work hinders their leadership. In their kebele, separate male and female development groups were established by government. Women reported that while the male group is very strong and playing an active role in the response to the drought, the women's group is non-functional. They reported that this is because women have been too busy with their family responsibilities to be able to participate.*

Women's burden of unpaid work was stressed as a key barrier to women's leadership in emergencies in Ethiopia. Women reported that in many cases they cannot attend the local government meetings because the meetings are held at a time when women have conflicting household responsibilities. Additionally, some meetings have extended into the night, which excludes women from participating in the full meeting due to domestic and safety concerns. They noted that having the time to participate is one concern, but they also find it difficult at meetings when they cannot concentrate fully because they are worried about what is happening at their home. Women consulted in the Philippines also reported that there were women with babies that wanted to be involved in response efforts, but they were unable to because a safe space had not been created for them to participate with their babies. Instead, these women asked their husbands to participate in the response in their absence.

## **Awareness, education, capacity and confidence**

Low levels of education and literacy amongst women were cited as significant barriers to women's humanitarian leadership in Ethiopia and Nepal. Low literacy rates are a historical injustice against women that means they are less likely to access information on emergency preparedness or humanitarian response planning.<sup>40</sup> Unless education and literacy are identified as barriers and specifically addressed in the modalities of humanitarian response, it will undoubtedly exclude women from participating in decision-making and leadership. Further, failing to address this barrier can leave women without important information about how to keep themselves and their family safe during a crisis, and limit their ability to hold humanitarian actors to account in the emergency response. The impact of this was highlighted by women in the Bangladesh focus group discussion. Women reported that before ActionAid's Women-Led Emergency Response program, they had little knowledge of disasters, how to reduce risk and how to respond. This meant that many women did not heed the warnings for Cyclone Sidr, with some women staying at home during the cyclone because they were not sure what to do without their husband's knowledge or consent.

Women in Nepal reported that their low levels of education and literacy cause them to have low self-confidence and feel reluctant to step forward as leaders: *“We are not educated compared with men so we do not feel confident to speak our voice”*, said one woman from the Nepal focus group discussion.

A lack of self-confidence was a common theme across all contexts. As previously discussed, because women are marginalised from public spaces where community decision-making and leadership occurs, they have not been able to build their skills and confidence to participate in decision-making and leadership in the same way as men – including in humanitarian response. For example, women consulted in Ethiopia reported that women were not aware of *“how to deal with issues and how to create influence”*. They stated that the *“awareness and empowerment level of women is very low and their confidence to be more involved in the emergency response process is low”*. Women asserted that to be in leadership positions, they need self-confidence.

*“We don’t have skills or capability. If we are not capable, then we cannot do anything. We need self-confidence. We should have a belief in oneself that I can also do something. We need to have a will to do it. If you have a thinking that you are capable to do something then definitely we can achieve it”*

Nepal Focus Group Discussion

Recognising the barriers that deny women opportunities to develop leadership skills and self-confidence, the Vanuatu Women-Led Protection Program evaluation report also highlighted that appointing women to leadership roles without supporting them to build their leadership skills will likely set them up to fail.

## Poverty and access to resources

Women make up 70% of the world’s poor<sup>41</sup> and humanitarian crises exacerbate poverty. People living in poverty are more vulnerable to the effects of humanitarian crises, frequently living in areas prone to drought and flooding on the margins of productive lands. Those who are killed, injured or left homeless by earthquakes, fires, floods, mudslides, or tropical storms often live in poor housing or high-risk locations such as coastal areas. Conflict also deepens poverty, impacting people’s livelihoods through increased insecurity and displacement.

*“We women are not economically strong; that is one of the reasons we cannot play active role.”*

Nepal Focus Group Discussion

Women living in poverty are most likely to be adversely affected in times of crisis, requiring them to concentrate what little resources they have on the survival of their family leaving little time to participate in leadership. This includes managing the double burden of their domestic role with income-generation activities.

*“It is difficult to provide voluntary work, as people are always busy earning their own livelihoods.”*

Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion

Women’s participation in humanitarian response is most commonly done on a voluntary basis. Not only does this take women away from their livelihood and income-generation activities, it often requires women to contribute their own resources to cover expenses such as travel and communication. While these costs are low, they can be prohibitive to women living in poverty. This was identified as a key barrier in Bangladesh and Nepal, where it was reported that there were women in the community who were interested in participating in the response but could not afford to. Further, as men traditionally control household finances, accessing even small amounts of money requires some women to get approval from their husbands. Access to resources to fund participation was highlighted as a key barrier in the evaluation of the Vanuatu Women-Led Protection Program evaluation, which found that women need a small amount of funding to enable them to continue to participate in response and recovery efforts.

## **Patriarchal attitudes and gender norms**

Patriarchal attitudes and norms significantly hinder and undermine women’s leadership in humanitarian settings. In highly patriarchal contexts, women’s participation in public space is often heavily controlled by male relatives, with women often requiring permission to leave their home to participate in public activities, which can be a formidable barrier to women’s leadership. When women do participate in public space, it can be perceived that they are challenging traditional gender roles and power dynamics, which increases women’s exposure to criticism, harassment and violence. Further, in such contexts women are exposed to strong messaging that they are not capable of being leaders, which can erode their self-confidence and willingness to step forward as leaders.

The research revealed that patriarchal gender norms and cultural practices were a significant barrier to women’s leadership in all contexts, although ActionAid’s women-led responses in Bangladesh and Philippines have managed to challenge these. Women in Bangladesh, for example, report that men have been more supportive of their wives after they have seen the benefits for the family and their increased recognition in the community. Patriarchal attitudes were reflected across the research impacting on women’s leadership.

Women in Ethiopia reported that they need permission from their husbands to participate in public activities or they will face problems at home. They report that many husbands are not happy with their wives participating in meetings and committees so they do not allow them to leave the home. Even when women are allowed to participate in public meetings, they report that they face criticism and harassment from the community, as it is perceived that they are transcending traditional gender roles and women are not considered to be capable leaders.

*“Disaster creates opportunity as well. Whoever overcomes the challenges is a survivor; whoever does not is a victim. Those who could manage to explore new things to do following a disaster is an opportunity seeker. We want to be that.”*

Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

In examining opportunities to strengthen women’s leadership in humanitarian response, focus group discussions highlighted the importance of recognising the existing leadership women provide as first responders in times of crises - leadership that largely goes unrecognised and undervalued. Women also highlight the unique skills and knowledge they bring to humanitarian action that can increase the effectiveness and impact of responses. As women highlight, efforts to build upon their existing leadership and capabilities need to focus on building women’s power within,<sup>42</sup> including their knowledge and skills in emergency preparedness and early warning as this will set them up for success from the onset of humanitarian crises. This needs to go hand-in-hand with a focus on strengthening power with and investment in women’s organising and mobilising efforts, including increased access to resources for women’s groups. These interventions will ultimately build women’s power to influence other actors as is seen through the case studies. Emergencies can be catalytic moments for transforming gender relations in societies, opening space for women’s leadership alongside men in times of crisis and facilitating women’s economic empowerment that will ensure greater resilience and capacity to engage over the longer term.

### **Recognising women’s existing leadership**

Women’s participation in decision-making is not only a fundamental human right but has also proven to contribute to better disaster preparedness and risk reduction, as well as peace building and conflict resolution in communities. Women’s leadership in humanitarian response enhances accountability to affected populations and the capacity of communities to lead response efforts, which results in more efficient and effective responses.

While women are all too often essentialised as victims, they play important roles in humanitarian response and recovery. It can take several weeks for international humanitarian actors to reach remote communities after a crisis and during that time, women have often emerged organically as leaders while assisting their community to respond to the crisis. For example, in the Philippines, international humanitarian agencies were unable to access some affected communities for several weeks. During that time, affected populations were dependent on family members, relatives and neighbours for assistance, with women playing a lead role in caring for children and family members who were injured or left traumatised by the disaster. Women involved in the research provided a number of examples of women’s self-initiated leadership, including of Indigenous women coming together in the

*“I went to Manila after Yolanda destroyed my house and property. My friend told me that there were relief items to be sent to the affected area but they don’t know how those can be delivered... So I asked my sister who lived in Germany to help [pay] 50,000 PHP to make those relief goods reach my barangay [village] and neighbour barangay.”*

Philippines Focus Group Discussion



aftermath of the Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) to make a plan for recovery to present to community leaders, while another woman shared that after the Typhoon she went directly to Manila to ensure the relief items made it to her community.

In Nepal women led rapid needs assessment to identify the people most affected by the earthquake and coordinated the subsequent distribution of relief materials, ensuring these went to the most vulnerable. Women worked together to support each other and used their own initiative to support the response, including inspecting the school building to ensure it was safe to send children back to school. In Gaza, after being excluded from the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, women decided to form an independent body to monitor the reconstruction mechanism and ensure that women's needs were met.

The research uncovered an example of how women's organic or informal leadership was recognised and built on by institutions involved in the response. In the Philippines, a woman who had previously worked as a homemaker became a volunteer for Food for Hunger in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. She was later made the cluster leader of her Barangay Palaypay Women's Association supported by PKKK (National Rural Women Coalition). The Women's Association is now playing a lead role in mobilizing the community for better disaster preparedness. There are clear opportunities to build on women's existing capabilities and leadership, although women report being marginalised from the official humanitarian response as the case study from Gaza highlights.

Women in many countries expressed frustration through the focus group discussions that their contribution to humanitarian response has been overlooked and undermined by their communities and by humanitarian actors, asserting *"there will be no women's leadership unless men recognise the great contribution of women at all levels"* (Gaza Focus Group Discussion). Women called for humanitarian response to engage women in

In Gaza, women mobilised individually and in groups to respond to the needs of their community during the conflict. They provided recreation and informal education for children; collected donations to provide assistance to people who were displaced; established a communications network through social media to communicate the location of shelters and the worst hit areas; and they coordinated volunteers for the school and hospital. In the shelters, women organised the crowd, provided food, looked after the most vulnerable members of the community, and provided advice on women's safety. There was a clear opportunity for international humanitarian actors to foster and build on women's leadership by engaging them in formal leadership and decision-making roles. However, women reported that men were recruited to manage the shelters, which gave them the authority and decision-making power over women. This meant that women were excluded from ensuring the equal distribution of food and were not able to ensure that women's specific needs were met. Further, giving men the authority over the operation of shelters when the majority of the displaced were women and children further entrenched power imbalances between women and men.

*"Women organized themselves spontaneously. Each one of us went down the street, we met there and then we became a group. When you are in a crisis, there is no time to procrastinate!" - Gaza Focus Group Discussion*

early warning mechanisms, preparedness planning, rapid needs assessment and relief distributions. Through the research, women affirmed that they want to be involved in the community leadership structures that lead response efforts and they want support from the humanitarian community to strengthen their capacity to lead. They expressed confidence that when women are involved they will ensure that the needs of women and the most marginalised and vulnerable in the community are met. When women are involved, there needs to be a conscious effort by humanitarian actors to ensure they are not pigeon holed exclusively into feminine roles that are often unpaid and undertaken on a voluntary basis, undervaluing their contribution and further limiting women's capacity to lead.

## Building on existing social networks, skills and capabilities

Due to socially constructed gender roles, women are likely to have knowledge, skills and experience different from that of men. Therefore, by not engaging women in leadership and decision-making, humanitarian actors are not accessing the full breadth of resources in any given context. For

example, in Bangladesh, women are responsible for managing the household, which includes purchasing household items from the markets. This experience positioned women to negotiate the best prices for the materials needed to rebuild after Cyclone Mahasen in 2013. Further, as managers of the household, women have a

unique understanding of the needs of the entire family, as well as knowledge that is essential when designing and constructing a house

*“As we manage the household and buy utensils for our home, we know about the needs and price. We compare materials. As women we can bargain more for it, which helps us when we procure products”*

**Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion**

Women's local knowledge, social networks and capacity to mobilise the community are an invaluable resource during a humanitarian response. This was demonstrated in the Gaza setting. Women consulted reported that they initiated a campaign to recruit volunteers using Facebook and Twitter and in some cases going door to door to speak to the parents of young women to explain the importance of their daughter's contribution to response efforts. Women have the capacity to mobilise the community to assist those most affected, which can prove critical in the response effort.

The focus group discussions indicated that women leaders are highly effective at ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are met in humanitarian response. In the Philippines consultation, elderly women and women with disabilities reported that women are better equipped to address their needs because they have a greater understanding of the issues affecting them. Women consulted in Ethiopia also felt that they had a better understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable in the community, and would therefore be more effective at addressing their needs. This is supported by available evidence, which indicates that women's leadership in humanitarian action leads to the needs of vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, older people and people with disabilities, being more actively considered and effectively addressed.<sup>43</sup> Women's concern for vulnerable members of the community is reflected across all five contexts. In Bangladesh women reported that when they

heard the warning of Cyclone Mahasen, they helped children, people with disabilities, pregnant women and the elderly to go to the cyclone shelter. In Ethiopia, the women's savings and credit cooperative provided loans to people outside of the cooperative who were severely affected, sick and most vulnerable to the drought. They also shared the little grain they had with women who were too sick and weak to collect fire wood to sell for food. Women in Gaza took it upon themselves to look after the most vulnerable women in the community, ensuring pregnant women and women in labour got the care they needed, as well as ensuring women's protection in the shelters, and counselling for those traumatised by the war.

Women from Nepal, Ethiopia and Gaza made strong calls for capacity development and training to build their knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in leadership. Women identified a range of capacity and skills development training needs, including basic education and training on women's rights and gender-based violence (GBV) (Nepal), adult literacy (Ethiopia), capacity-building in leadership and training on crowd management, emergency response, women's protection, communications and first aid (Gaza). Women in Ethiopia and the Philippines called for women to be supported to develop a greater understanding of early warning and emergency response and to improve their capacity to participate and lead in emergency preparedness and response.

## Investing in women's leadership of emergency preparedness and resilience building

Investing in women's leadership of emergency preparedness is an effective strategy for cultivating women's leadership, building resilience and reducing the impact of humanitarian crises.<sup>44</sup> Due to women's unique front-line knowledge of their local environment, they have enormous potential to be transformational agents in community emergency planning and preparedness and to play a significant role in bolstering resilience.<sup>45</sup> Further, ActionAid's experience demonstrates that

*“Before Cyclone Sidr, we didn't know that disaster risk can be reduced with preparation and planning. We've never prepared for any disasters before. If we heard of a natural hazard coming our way, we would just pray.”*

**Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion**

building women's leadership in emergency preparedness fosters a sense of self-confidence and empowerment which can help transform gender power relations over the longer term and address the barriers that have traditionally excluded women from decision-making and leadership.<sup>46</sup>

The countries under study reaffirmed these findings, with women's leadership in humanitarian response significantly more pronounced in communities where women had been engaged in emergency preparedness and resilience programming prior to the crisis. Both Bangladesh and the Philippines have suffered two major disasters in reasonably close succession – particularly the Philippines where Typhoon Haiyan (2013) and Typhoon Ruby (2014) were only a year apart. Bangladesh was hit by Cyclone Sidr in 2007 and Cyclone Mahasen in 2013. These case studies provide excellent demonstrations of the transformative power of investing in women's leadership of emergency preparedness and resilience building, as in both scenarios this investment was made after the first disaster and before the second so they provided the opportunity to compare women's leadership in each response.

In Bangladesh, women reported that before Cyclone Sidr in 2007, they had little knowledge of disasters, how to reduce risk and how to respond. Women's response to Cyclone Mahasen in May 2013, however, was markedly different. In 2008 ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) initiated a climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction (CCA-DRR) project in two disaster-prone locations in the country where there is increased vulnerability to salinity and cyclones. Several months before Cyclone Mahasen, AAB's Emergency Fast Action Team identified women leaders from existing women's organisations in the most vulnerable areas and provided basic training on cyclone preparedness and response. In the aftermath of the Cyclone, AAB supported women to lead the entire community-level response, including: carrying out the rapid needs assessment; creating a response budget and securing funding from AAB; procuring all materials required for the response; and implementing the response, including rebuilding and repairing houses, seed distribution, sanitary latrine installation, and emergency relief distributions. Women's leadership in the response to Cyclone Mahasen transformed women's status in their communities and created a pathway for their leadership in the community. This is discussed further under on page 27.

The impact of investing in women's leadership in emergency preparedness in Bangladesh is mirrored in the Philippines. The consultations revealed some instances of women's informal leadership in the response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, however there were few examples of women being engaged in the formal response. In the aftermath of Typhoon

Ruby in 2014, however, women played a lead role in early warning and evaluation processes and undertaking rapid needs assessments. The difference in women's leadership can be attributed to women's participation in women-led disaster risk reduction committees and the corresponding capacity-building training provided by ActionAid Philippines in September 2014 – three months before the typhoon struck.

*“We prepared a cave for people as an evacuation centre. When we were informed about Typhoon Ruby, we went around to inform people of the need for evacuation. We did a head-count; disaggregating for men, women, elderly, people with disabilities, children, boys and girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers. We think it was very important to do this as we witness when the emergencies supplies were sent to us, these included specific items needed for girls and babies with sanitary napkins, diapers, milk powder, and medicine for sick people.”*

Philippines Focus Group Discussion

## Supporting women's mobilising and organising efforts

Investing in women and their organisations is identified as an important strategy for ensuring the success and sustainability of emergency response and recovery. The existence of women's groups was a key enabling factor for women's leadership in humanitarian action in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Gaza, and Nepal. Women consulted in Gaza reported that pre-conflict training they received through community based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs

on leadership, volunteerism and fieldwork, facilitated their activism during the war. In Bangladesh, the Women-Led Emergency Response was formed with women leaders identified through existing women's groups. Women consulted in the research reported that the prior existence of these groups and organisations was critical to the success of the response and amplifying women's voices.

Consultations in Nepal revealed that women mostly played meaningful leadership roles through their local women's group, including leading street programs to support women in the emergency period, practically, financially and emotionally. In Ethiopia, women in the savings and credit cooperative were notably more able to overcome the barriers to women's leadership and contribute to the humanitarian response. It was reported that while women do not usually leave the home to participate in community meetings, members of the cooperative have increasingly gained more access to planning meetings. Additionally, given their access to financial resources through the cooperative, they were able to support the most vulnerable members of the community during the drought by providing them with loans and sharing their grain, demonstrating the benefits of women's greater access to and control over resources for the community.

Supporting women's mobilising and organising by creating opportunities for them to come together to build knowledge, confidence and skills to work collectively has proven effective in providing opportunities for transformative leadership, even in challenging contexts. The Vanuatu Women-Led Protection programme evaluation found that ActionAid's model of bringing women together to discuss and analyse rights, and draw strengths from others, including men and other allies in positions of influence, is essential for preparing them for leadership roles. It also highlights the importance of resourcing these efforts, particularly for women from rural and remote communities.

Practice-based experience shows that utilising the capacity and knowledge of local women's groups is one of the most effective ways to increase the impact of humanitarian response.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, just one percent of all funding to fragile states in 2015 went to women's organisations or governments' ministries of women.<sup>48</sup> Supporting women's mobilising efforts and investing in their leadership of humanitarian response is a key strategy for building 'power with' and supporting the localisation of humanitarian response. It is also of vital importance for strengthening the link between immediate relief efforts and longer-term recovery and development and enhancing accountability to affected populations, particularly women and girls.

*“Before women’s groups, women never stepped outside of the house, no matter what they need. Women took on the leadership when they understood that they can perform such emergency roles better than men.”*

**Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion**

*“Through the women’s forum, we are trying to raise women’s voices in the disaster response, so that they can speak for themselves and think for themselves, rather than someone else doing this for us. Women must know their rights so that they can stand up and speak for themselves. That is our priority now. We are also holding our government accountable ”*

**Vanuatu Women’s Forum, Women I Tok Tok Toketa**

## Transformations in gender relations through new roles for women

While humanitarian crises can be deeply disempowering for women, they also create opportunities for strengthening women's empowerment.<sup>49</sup> Humanitarian crises are characterised by physical and social upheaval, creating space for major social transformations that would ordinarily take decades, such as transformation of gender power relations. Humanitarian crises can disrupt gender roles and routines and the lines between the private and public spheres. The urgency of survival-linked tasks can facilitate opportunities for women to challenge and transgress traditional gender roles and norms.<sup>50</sup> However, humanitarian actors need to be careful not to put too much burden on women or create a backlash in gender relations that can hamper the creation of new roles for women.

There is evidence in all contexts of gender norms and roles shifting in response to the humanitarian crises and response. In Nepal, women explained that *“compared to before the earthquake, we have been freely moving around. There is support from the family to attend programs as well”*. Women in Ethiopia reported that they are more involved in work outside of the house, such as road

*“The beauty of the war - I was able to bring together young women and men who have never talked, because of the social barriers, to work for a just cause. My heart was full of happiness despite the pain!”*

Gaza Focus Group Discussion

construction and they are now being consulted on decisions about resource allocation and other household issues that were previously decided by men alone. Husbands are reportedly showing more respect to their wives in response to women's crucial role in the resilience of their households. Women in Gaza worked side-by-side with men during the conflict, which would not have been acceptable before the war. Women in Bangladesh highlighted notable shifts in gender norms and roles, including that women are now encouraged and supported to participate in community decision-making, and some men take care of their family and cook for them when women are participating in activities outside of the home. They reported that women's opinions are more valued now, which they consider a significant change in their community.

Enhancing women's rights and empowerment has been shown to build resilience and reduce the impact of potential humanitarian crises.<sup>51</sup> In fact, it is increasingly asserted that reducing gender inequality prior to an event is one of the most important tools for disaster risk reduction and resilience building.<sup>52</sup> With increasing links between development, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian work comes opportunities for intentional and innovative efforts to progress a transformative agenda that balances urgent needs for food and shelter with investments that reduce people's vulnerability over the longer term and increase their resilience.

ActionAid's experience shows that facilitating women's leadership in emergency preparedness and humanitarian response builds a sense of self-confidence and empowerment which can help transform power relations in societies where women have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes.<sup>53</sup> This is reaffirmed by the research. Women in the Philippines and Bangladesh report that as a result of their participation in the women-led response initiatives, their leadership is more visible and valued in the community. Women in Bangladesh shared that now they get respect and honour for their contribution to society and they are more resilient because they have the support of their family and community. Women in the Philippines reported that they now play a more visible role in family-level decision-making.

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Women consulted in Gaza, reported that the social, cultural and traditional norms that previously hindered their leadership dissolved in times of conflict. They asserted that *“a war situation was essential to change the power structure”*. Women reported that gender norms have shifted to allow women greater access to public space. This in turn has enabled women to develop their skills, experience and confidence in participating and leading emergency response. The research indicates that these shifts in gender norms have been enabled by the dependence of the community on women during crisis periods and the protracted nature of the conflict. Women explained that men’s mobility during the war was significantly reduced due to the risk that they would be seen as being suspicious and killed. Subsequently, men relied on women for food, medicine and other necessities. One woman reflected that *“women became the breadwinner, the initiators, the protectors and the first to reach the shelters.”* Women conveyed that this extra responsibility led to increased leadership status.

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Another key enabler for women’s leadership in Gaza is that women grew up watching their mothers transcend gender roles to lead humanitarian action. Women consulted in the focus groups grew up under military occupation and intermittent conflict and have experienced acute conflict three times since 2008. Two women consulted in the research expressed that their mothers inspired them to be leaders when their community has been in crises. One woman explained: *“I grew up watching my mother leaving six kids home to help war-affected people in the previous wars. That was an inspiration and a motivation for me to follow her steps.”* Another woman commented: *“my mother used to come back home after midnight where she was supporting women in labour to deliver! My father was volunteering rescuing people who were under the rubble! Of course I will devote my life to serve my people who need me!*

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Women highlighted that while they have increased mobility and access to public space, they still experience harassment and violence for transgressing gender norms – particularly when they speak up about ensuring women’s needs are met in the distribution of relief. They also noted that women’s increased mobility and leadership status is challenged when the war ends; women are expected to realign their behaviour with the pre-war socially prescribed gender norms. Women said that despite the social pressure, *“the social and leadership gains that resulted from their activism during the war is sustainable and will never be neglected”*.

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*“The war unveiled women’s leadership; we were rooted as an olive tree in the face of airstrikes, the future is ours, this is a destiny!”*

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**ActionAid’s Women-Led Emergency Response (WLER)** initiative in Bangladesh played an important role in recognising and validating women’s leadership. Women consulted in the research reported that in the initial stages of the response, people with power in the community were threatened by their success and they spread rumours about them. However, now those same people turn to members of the WLER for advice and training on disaster preparedness and risk reduction. This transformation was in part facilitated by women having control over resources for rebuilding the community. Women report that as a result of their participation in the WLER initiative, men are now supportive of women’s leadership. Previously men did not let women leave the house to participate in training and workshops, but they now send women to attend by themselves. Women’s leadership is now highly visible in the community, even sought out by local media and government, and men are responding positively.

## Increasing women's economic empowerment and access to resources

Increasing women's economic empowerment has also been identified as an important strategy for transforming gender relations and facilitating women's leadership. The South Asia Women's Resilience Index found that women's economic empowerment programs can effectively enhance women's leadership through improving the "bargaining power" of women, formalising their right to assets and involving them in local planning as decision-makers. This has been achieved through economic empowerment programs because the cultural constraints placed on women that typically prohibit their participation in decision-making are loosened in favour of communities having access to the funds that are affiliated with the project.<sup>54</sup> This was reaffirmed in the research, with women from Gaza reporting that their mobility and participation comes under less scrutiny when it is associated with financial return to the family. Additionally, the Bangladesh case study demonstrates that when women control resources for planning and relief activities, their status, influence and position in the community improves. This supports their ability to influence broader community decision-making, such as disaster coordination committees, to ensure that preparedness and response planning reflects women's priorities. Additionally, women consulted in Nepal, report that by providing financial support and resources directly to women, ActionAid supported women to play a more meaningful role in family decision-making.

## Engaging with men in transforming gender relations

Another strategy for transforming gender relations and facilitating women's leadership that was identified in the research is supporting women to engage men in strengthening their understanding of women's rights and their support for women's leadership. The Vanuatu Women's Led Protection program evaluation highlights that because of the power men have over women it is essential to engage with men to advance the rights of women. The evaluation found that men living in poverty in Vanuatu have a low level of consciousness of human rights and of women's needs in a humanitarian crisis, including women's health issues. In response to a request from men in the community, Action Aid provided men with training on human rights. The evaluation revealed several examples of men adopting more gender progressive attitudes after the training and becoming advocates for women's rights. Engaging men can strengthen the support for a program that is working with women, ensure that women have a safe space to gather and reduce the risk of violence towards women who transcend gender norms with their leadership. Women consulted in Nepal also called for women's rights awareness raising for women and men in their communities and women in Gaza and Bangladesh highlighted that men's support for their leadership is an important enabling factor: *"the support of our husbands encourages us, so we work together to make our men more understanding about what we are doing"* (Bangladesh Focus Group Discussion). The evaluation report stressed however, that engagement with men needs to be carefully managed so that it does not compromise women's access to exclusive space and undermine outcomes for women. ActionAid's extensive experience also shows that more sustainable results are achieved when local women are supported to lead engagement with male leaders in their community rather than rely on outside interventions.



# CONCLUSION

The voices of women in crisis affected communities are clear; there is a strong demand for strengthening women's leadership in humanitarian preparedness and response. This reinforces the messages conveyed through the Global Consultation of the World Humanitarian Summit which called for "concerted action to close the gender gap and generate concrete steps that trigger accountability for the inclusion and leadership of women and girls in humanitarian action."<sup>55</sup> It also echoes the joint position statement<sup>56</sup> of 12 organisations, led by ActionAid, who call on all World Humanitarian Summit delegations to make a pledge to put women's leadership, gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) at the heart of major global humanitarian system reforms to better protect and assist people affected by crisis. For women's leadership to become a reality, transformational change needs to happen within the humanitarian system, including at an operational level, where women are on the frontline and have their own priorities for action.

## Women's Priorities for Action

Through the focus group discussions, women were asked to identify their priorities for action in strengthening women's leadership in humanitarian response. Each context is unique so the priorities of women in each focus group discussion varied, based on the specific circumstances in each country. Further, within countries and focus groups, women have diverse experiences and priorities, based on their position in society and their experiences of discrimination and marginalisation among other factors. These priorities were broadly articulated as the importance of investing in building women's leadership capacity – particularly in risk reduction and emergency preparedness; strengthening women's leadership in community decision-making structures; acknowledging women's existing leadership in response efforts and working with women leaders; and addressing the practical barriers to women's leadership.

### **1) Invest in strengthening women's leadership capacity – particularly in risk reduction and emergency preparedness**

Women in focus group discussions in all five countries requested support to develop their leadership capacity, skills and knowledge in emergency preparedness and response. Women identified a range of capacity and skills development needs, including basic education and training on women's rights and GBV (Nepal), adult literacy (Ethiopia), and leadership development and training on crowd management, emergency situations, women's protection, communications and first aid (Gaza). Women consulted in Nepal asserted that they "*want to be*

*involved in social activities through which we can talk about our issues and encourage women to come out of the household.* They also stressed the need for training and skills development to enhance women's economic status, recognising linkages between economic empowerment and the ability to withstand shocks and disasters, as well as contribute to the response. The evaluation report of the Women-Led Protection Program in Vanuatu also highlighted the importance of providing capacity development to build women's confidence and equip them with skills to take on leadership roles.

Women from Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Gaza advocated for the need to strengthen women's capacity in risk reduction and emergency preparedness. Women in Ethiopia called for all humanitarian actors to work with women to improve their understanding of early warning and emergency response. In Bangladesh, where women received some training as part of Action Aid's Women-Led Emergency Response program, women asked for more intense and in-depth training to face disasters. In the Philippines, women, particularly older women, called for a greater focus on disaster preparedness. They expressed the need for increased support to enable them to actively participate and lead emergency preparedness and response. Women specifically noted that they want to be actively involved in mobilising the community for better preparedness.

## **2) Facilitate women's leadership in community decision-making structures**

A priority for action that emerged from women in the focus group discussions is the need to ensure women's leadership in community decision-making structures leading emergency response as a clear way of ensuring inclusion of women's priorities and perspectives. As highlighted previously, in Ethiopia, only members of the kebele administration are able to be on the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Committee, the coordinating body for humanitarian response, which means women's representation in the kebele administration is very low. Women from Ethiopia consulted in the research recommended that the kebele administration be given clear directions to include women in the lower kebele level leadership roles such as zone and development group leaders. They asserted that if women are included in the village development group leaders it will facilitate women's leadership in the response process, which will make the response more effective and ensure that the needs of women and the most marginalised are addressed.

In the Philippines, women asserted that humanitarian actors should coordinate through the Municipal Local Government Units (LGUs), who are mandated to lead humanitarian response. The leaders of each village council coordinate with the LGUs. There are some women members of the village council - usually more affluent women, however women rarely have leadership positions in the Council. In Indigenous communities, community leaders reach out to the village council and the community leaders are always male. Women consulted for the research expressed that they want to be involved in the early warnings and actively participate in "Bayanihan" (volunteering for the community).

### **3) Build upon women’s existing leadership in response efforts**

Women expressed frustration throughout the focus group discussions that their contribution to the response was overlooked and undermined by their communities and by humanitarian actors. This frustration and women’s calls for the humanitarian community to acknowledge and work with existing local women leaders has been highlighted throughout this report. With the exception of responses in Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Vanuatu, where ActionAid supported women to lead response efforts, women consulted in the other countries reported that women were rarely consulted about their needs or engaged in the response efforts by their communities or national and international humanitarian actors. They called for humanitarian response to engage women leaders in early warning mechanisms, preparedness planning, rapid needs assessment and distributing relief. Women want to be involved in leading response efforts, building on their existing leadership, and they want support from the humanitarian community to strengthen their capacity to take up increasing leadership roles. They argue that when women are involved they are able to ensure that the needs of women and the most marginalised and vulnerable in the community are met.

Recognising their exclusion from the development of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, women consulted in Gaza are calling for the humanitarian community to work with women leaders to develop an emergency preparedness plan for Gaza. They also want recognition of the important role women played in providing psychological support to the community and increased support to perform this role in the protracted crisis.

In Bangladesh, women stressed the importance of NGOs providing support to women and expressed that they “get good mental support” when an institution stands beside them.

### **4) Address the practical barriers to women’s leadership: time and money**

As discussed in the section on barriers, when women’s leadership is done on a voluntary basis, it requires that they have financial capacity to spend time away from their livelihoods, unpaid work responsibilities, and access to money to support their participation, including communication and travel costs. Women in both Bangladesh and Vanuatu requested financial support to cover the costs of travel for their engagement in humanitarian action.

Women also called for humanitarian actors to consider language barriers, illiteracy, unpaid work responsibilities and the timing of meetings in their efforts to engage women. Some recommendations for addressing these barriers include for humanitarian actors to appoint more local people to reduce language barriers, provide functional literacy programs alongside emergency relief efforts, and ensure that women are consulted over meeting times for community decision-making forums and committees to ensure these are accessible. Women consulted in Ethiopia stressed the need for the burden of unpaid work to be minimised through services and support so that they can participate in leadership. In the Philippines, women called for support to build an enabling environment for lactating mothers so they can still contribute to humanitarian response. They also called for additional support and mechanisms for people with disabilities to ensure they are able to participate, such as interpreters for those with speech impairments and ensuring the accessibility of venues.

# Recommendations for Humanitarian System Reform

Recognising women as leaders and building on their skills and capabilities is of vital importance for: enhancing the accountability of the humanitarian system to affected populations; building resilience; strengthening the link between immediate relief efforts and longer term recovery and development; and fulfilling women's right to participate in and influence the decisions and institutions that affect their lives.

The research clearly demonstrate that women's leadership during humanitarian response is a highly effective and under-utilised resource. Women have demonstrated that even in the most restrictive of environments, they actively seek out opportunities to play an active role in supporting their community to respond to and recover from a humanitarian crisis. Women have been particularly instrumental in ensuring that the most vulnerable members of the community do not get left behind. Women's tremendous capacity to support affected populations while simultaneously being excluded from decision-making processes at all levels is a testament to their resilience and their capacity for leadership. In contexts where women have had the opportunity to strengthen their leadership skills and knowledge of disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness and response, women have demonstrated their capability as leaders in an inclusive and localised response, and in many instances, they have transgressed restrictive gender norms and transformed attitudes towards women's leadership.

Based on the barriers and opportunities highlighted and the priorities for action identified by women through the research, the following recommendations are made to humanitarian actors looking to make tangible investments to support women's agency and voice in emergencies.

ActionAid joins with women first responders in the communities where we work in calling upon humanitarian actors to prioritise women's leadership in humanitarian action as part of the Agenda for Humanity. In order to address the clear barriers that exist due to widespread gender discrimination and inequality, and maximise the tremendous potential that women's leadership can bring to preparedness and response efforts, the following recommendations are made of humanitarian actors, including governments, UN agencies and INGOs:

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1. Ensure **direct funding** to local and national women's organisations to support their efforts to create safe spaces for women to organise and mobilise in emergencies, and actively engage in crisis response, including resourcing for core operations and advocacy work.

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2. Scale up **training opportunities** for local women leaders in emergency preparedness, early warning and response, and other priorities identified by women (e.g. functional literacy) that will facilitate their increased engagement and leadership in humanitarian action.

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3. Commit to **gender parity** in all community-level, national and international representation structures overseeing emergency preparedness and response, establishing targets, removing barriers to participation and ensuring adequate training and support for women to participate equally with men.

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4. Establish a **mechanism within the UN humanitarian coordination system** that focuses explicitly on overseeing gender equality in humanitarian responses, including facilitating the direct involvement of local and national women's organisations.

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5. Recognise the **burden of unpaid work** on women's participation and leadership in humanitarian action and consult with women as part of preparedness and response planning about practical mechanisms that can redistribute this burden (e.g. child care services, financial support, child-inclusive spaces).

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6. Commit to **long-term engagement** to support women's leadership capacity and resilience building, including women's social and economic empowerment, alongside short-term emergency response initiatives recognising the time that is required to shift power and entrenched gender inequalities and discrimination.

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7. Improve **gender and age disaggregated data** in rapid needs assessment and ensure women are part of data collection, analysis and response decision-making to ensure that humanitarian response is targeted to women's diverse needs.

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8. Ensure protection from violence against women is prioritised at the onset of each emergency response, including resourcing of women's groups to identify and respond to protection risks as a key strategy in developing sustainable community based protection mechanisms.

<sup>1</sup>Numbers derived from OCHA Global Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015 and all additional inter-agency response plans, such as Nepal, Sahel and Djibouti. This number does not include people affected by the Ebola crisis.

## Endnotes

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