

Promoting Gender Equality in the Humanitarian Response

Background

Nepal is signatory to 23 human rights treaties and International human rights instruments. The legal framework in Nepal largely supports women's rights and equality including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820. The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 states "*no physical, mental or any forms of violence shall be inflicted to any women, and such an act shall be punishable by law*". Nepal is also a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which it ratified in 2010, showing that the Nepal government is committed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Similarly, the Government of Nepal passed the Senior Citizens Act in 2006 that promotes the protection and social security of older people. However, despite heightened awareness, policies, programmes and plans of action supporting the advancement of gender equality and social inclusion, discriminatory social norms and harmful practices continue in many parts of Nepal. For example, marriage continues to play a decisive role in all women's life choices and social- economic position¹. Traditional practices such as Badi (caste-based sex work), Chaupadi (menstrual seclusion), Kamlari (bonded labour of daughters) and Deuki (selling daughter to temples as child goddesses), as well as child marriage, are still prevalent in many parts of Nepal despite being outlawed². Violence against women related to accusations of witchcraft, son- preference, stigmatisation of widows, and seclusion of women (purdah), family violence, and polygamy are among the many issues that still obstruct the realisation of gender equality. According to Amnesty International 2014 report *Unnecessary Burden*, it is estimated that more than 600,000 women suffer from conditions related to uterine prolapse due to early marriage, early pregnancy, overwork and neglect. The maternal mortality rate is still the highest in the world (170 per 100,000 birth)³. The prevalence of violence against women and girls, notably older women and women with disabilities in Nepal remains unacceptably high with even higher levels among those with no education or from poorer households.⁴ As many civil society organisations have noted, gender equality is often limited to laws and policy and is not yet fully translated into the lived realities of women.⁵ Elderly widows are a group of particular concern⁶.

The impact of emergencies on prevailing inequalities

The social norms and discriminatory practices briefly described, have a devastating impact on women and girls and other marginalised groups when disaster strikes. In Nepal, 55% of those who have died are female with early data clearly showing that women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the earthquake, based on their social roles and locations. Furthermore, gender inequalities undermine the ability of women and girls to fully participate in humanitarian action and response. An issue of particular concern relates to the lack or loss of documentation (including citizenship papers) which, in the absence of a male relative, renders many women unable to access humanitarian assistance and support. While women have been disproportionately impacted by the earthquakes, simply viewing them as victims only exacerbates their vulnerability. Women have knowledge, relationships, practical skills and leadership roles that are critical to every level of relief and recovery efforts, including when it comes to shaping priorities and addressing needs. Women's equal representation in and contribution to all decision-making structures and the economic recovery process are crucial.

¹ CARE Nepal Women Empowerment Program Framework 2010

² Nepal MDG Progress Report p. 35; Amnesty International, Nepal Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2014

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Government of Nepal and UN Country Team Nepal, MDG Progress Report 2013

⁶ <http://www.globalaging.org/health/world/2010/nepal.pdf>

It is therefore critical to understand how crises affect women and men, girls and boys of different ages, social conditions, disability and other diversities for an effective humanitarian response. Women, girls, boys, men have distinct needs, priorities, responsibilities, limitations and protection needs. They are exposed to differential risks and vulnerabilities but also play unique and important roles in responding to emergencies within their respective communities. Gender equality as well as social inclusion are thus about better targeting and programming and therefore about the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

The Intersectional Approach

An intersectional approach promotes an understanding of the ways in which gender intersects with other social identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. For example, women may be subject to gender discrimination, but other factors including caste, age, ethnicity, ancestry, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic class, disability, geographic location, and status as a migrant, refugee, internally displaced person, child, or a person living with HIV/AIDS and so on, combine with gender to determine one's social location. Intersectional vulnerability and capacity analysis helps us to visualise the convergence of different types of discrimination – as points of intersection or overlap. Moreover, it helps us to understand and assess the impact of these converging identities on opportunities and access to rights. By adopting an intersectional approach, we are able to allocate resources to those who are most marginalised as revealed by the analysis of intersecting discriminations. Empowering those who have the least access to rights and resources and focusing on processes that lead to poverty and exclusion (e.g. by providing access to basic medical services and educational opportunities, protecting their livelihood security, or supplying appropriate agricultural technologies and inputs) may effect the greatest tangible advances in terms of women's rights, gender equality and social inclusion.

Strategy to integrate Gender Equality Programming

To effectively mainstream and integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Nepal Earthquake Response, the Humanitarian Country Team established an Inter-cluster Gender Task Force to complement the work of the Protection Cluster and the GBV sub-cluster. The Inter Cluster Gender Task Force, in operation just five days after the earthquake and consisting of over 60 members, has been working to ensure that gender aspects are incorporated in the work of all clusters, providing a forum to share information and monitor impact. A core group of cluster gender focal points is being established within the Gender Task Force to permit rapid decision-making, while also keeping the full membership informed of developments. Cluster gender focal points are providing support and guidance to the clusters as well as regular cluster-specific feedback to the Task Force to ensure a coordinated approach to gender mainstreaming, armed with checklists, guidelines and tip sheets provided by the task force. The Task Force has formed three smaller working groups on 1) assessments, 2) messaging, and 3) social inclusion.

The Inclusion Working Group works under the auspices of the Inter-Cluster Gender Task Force to promote and support the effective mainstreaming of ageing, disability, sexual identity, geographical remoteness, poverty, caste and ethnicity, socio-economic status and marital status (e.g. single women, widows) into the humanitarian response and the early recovery programme of the government, national and international humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders.

The Inclusion Working Group is supported by more than 25 NGOs working on ageing and disability issues in Nepal. Cluster focal points representing agencies with gender mandates in each cluster support the gender focal points of the cluster to strengthen the gender equality input.

Progress thus far

Key achievements so far include: applying the gender marker to projects in the flash appeal, gender and inclusion inputs into the Cash for Work guidelines; gender integrated into the food and wash clusters needs assessments and the CCCM Displacement Tracking Matrix; the women's organisation (Pourakhi) being engaged in food distribution; gender and inclusion integrated into WASH response plan, monitoring and tracking sheets; gender inputs provided on the mental health cluster psychosocial referral tool and reporting format; sex-disaggregated data included in Wash SWs reporting format; inputs provided on GBV referral guideline; recommendations made to include women's organisations and female trekker associations in relief distribution. The Task Force is in the process of developing a tracking system with cluster-specific gender and inclusion indicators to monitor the gender-responsiveness of the humanitarian response through the clusters. The Task Force is also in the process of mapping the Cluster Gender Focal Points deployed in the sub hubs in Sindhupalchowk and Gorkha to ensure better linkages to the field.

An Information Management focal point has been appointed to the Task Force. Key information products produced so far include a Country Gender Profile and the [Gender Equality Bulletin No 1](#) which was published on 21st May. This bulletin displays key facts and figures, initiatives, progress, challenges, needs and opportunities related to gender equality, and the empowerment of women's and other vulnerable groups in the context of the Nepal earthquake emergency response. Key information from this bulletin was highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's daily noon briefing on Friday 22nd May: <http://www.un.org/sg/spokesperson/highlights/index.asp>. The Task Force will be producing these bulletins on a regular basis by continuously consolidating gender and inclusion inputs from various sources. A [Special Edition Gender Equality Bulletin](#) was published on 25th May 2015 marking the one month anniversary of the 7.8 earthquake on 25th April.

The Gender Task Force is represented in the HCT and regularly raises issues of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment based on inputs received from GTF members. Task Force members are also ensuring that gender equality is mainstreamed throughout the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment and supporting the lead agency the Gender Equality and Social inclusion chapter.

Key issues to be addressed:

- Promoting the participation of women's and other vulnerable groups in relief distribution and monitoring committees
- Monitoring, preventing and addressing Incidents of GBV and trafficking
- Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly for pregnant and lactating women and family planning.
- Ensuring security for all vulnerable women and girls in the camps (lighting, overcrowding, no privacy).
- Promoting access to mobility, hearing and visual aids for older people and persons with personal disability.
- Ensuring equitable access to information and distribution of relief, including women's of personal hygiene items.

- Advocating for nutritious food, particularly for pregnant and lactating women.
- Promoting accessible distribution points for vulnerable groups, especially housebound older people, persons with disability and pregnant women.
- Advocating for proxy system or support for vulnerable groups to carry the heavier packaged relief aid.
- Ensuring that the risk of exclusion from relief due lack of formal documentation is addressed.
- Ensuring that women's knowledge, expertise and skills are acknowledged and integrated into the humanitarian response particularly at the district level.

Going forward

The Gender Task Force is focusing on creating a tracking and monitoring mechanism through identifying key indicators to which each cluster can commit. This will be used to ensure that gender and diversity considerations are fully operationalised at all levels of the ongoing relief, early recovery, recovery and transition to normal life. As the response matures, the Gender Task Force will link with the UN Gender Theme Group and relevant government department to form a gender surge team. This team will then begin to focus on providing technical support to preparedness activities and be available to be activated at the onset of a crisis.