Women and Girls in Emergencies

Conflicts, natural disasters and climate change have the greatest impact in the poorest, least developed countries, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, including women and girls. Currently, more than 65 million people are displaced, which makes this the biggest refugee crisis in recorded history.

CARE’s 70 years of experience supporting people displaced by conflict and natural disasters have taught us that emergencies impact men and women differently and often change household and community dynamics. After floods, earthquakes and in contexts of violence and conflict, women have a more difficult time accessing safe shelter, adequate levels of food, necessary medical care and physical security. Where access to health care is difficult, pregnant women face dangerous deliveries. Where food is scarce, women often eat last and eat the least.

In times of crisis, violence against women increases. In the home, in refugee camps and shelters, women and girls lack basic security and social networks, leaving them vulnerable to violence and abuse. For example, sexual violence, including rape, has long been used as a tactic of war, with sexual violence against women and girls by combatants reported in many conflicts. Other forms of violence against women — including domestic violence; sexual exploitation and abuse; and child, early and forced marriage — are also common during crisis.

Women are part of the solution

CARE focuses primarily on women and girls in emergency settings because they are consistently the most vulnerable to violence, have the least economic power and require specialized health care and services. However, women also hold the most potential for creating and sustaining meaningful change in their lives and the lives of their children, families and communities. When women’s voices and needs are heard, practical solutions to everyday problems can emerge. As women take up leadership roles, food aid distribution is more equitable, latrines are built in safer places to prevent women’s and girls’ vulnerability to sexual assault, support systems are resurrected to better protect women from domestic violence and schools and livelihood activities have more power.

How does CARE address women’s and girls’ needs in emergencies?

CARE works in 94 countries around the world, implementing programs that improve women’s and girls’ economic, education, health, housing and family options. When disaster strikes, we are already in or near the affected country and our staff are members of the community. We are first responders who set up basic sanitation, nutrition, shelter and health services and long-term partners who help countries rebuild after the emergency has subsided. In doing this, CARE has learned that incorporating a gender analysis and working with women is critical to a successful response.

CARE takes a comprehensive approach to emergency relief that emphasizes and prioritizes women’s and girls’ needs:

- Before an emergency, we work with communities to prepare for and reduce the impact of disasters.
- During an emergency, we apply a solid gender analysis of the different roles and needs of women, men, boys and girls within the community so we can rapidly understand how they are affected by the crisis.
- We ground our emergency response strategies directly on that gender analysis so that our program design and implementation addresses those needs.
- We monitor the different impacts of our responses on women, men, boys and girls so that we can quickly course-correct if needs are missed.
• We partner with local groups to provide immediate assistance when an emergency hits.
• We ensure our own teams are gender-balanced and understand and respect CARE’s codes of conduct and can assess and respond to different needs of men, women, boys and girls.

Finally, as communities start to recover, CARE ensures that women and girls can access resources and opportunities. We work with survivors, especially women and children, to help them recover and rebuild after the crisis has passed.

CARE helps to keep women and girls healthy and safe by focusing on their unique needs when distributing food and emergency supplies. We:

• Help ensure girls go to school
• Raise awareness about violence against women
• Provide reproductive and maternal health services
• Teach mothers skills they need to rebuild their family’s lives.

**Does it work?**

Yes! Experience and research demonstrate that even during times of crisis and in areas of destruction, when women and girls in emergency situations are offered opportunities for health care, education and employment training and when their unique safety, health and family needs are addressed, they:

• Discover new strengths, skills and capacities that lead to income-generating opportunities
• Develop new relationship dynamics within their families and communities that reflect emerging gender equality
• Enjoy a greater level of safety, security and hope that, even within challenging and traumatic circumstances, there are opportunities for personal, economic and cultural growth.

CARE believes emergencies and natural disasters can be averted and prevented, or their impact can be reduced, by empowering women and girls and giving them equal access to the economic, social, health, education and occupational opportunities that men and boys receive. That is how we reduce global poverty, increase global security and make the world stronger, safer and more resilient in the face of challenges to come.

Addressing women’s and girls’ unique needs during emergencies helps foster stability and security both in individual lives and the world-at-large. By helping women, families and entire communities prepare for potential emergencies, meeting their immediate basic needs following a crisis and providing the tools to rebuild their lives, we’re improving America’s ability to build allies, advance businesses and trade and remain a global leader in humanitarian assistance. Now is the time for the U.S. to exert our moral, political and financial leadership to improve the lives of those left in the direst of conditions. The prospects for peace and prosperity rest on our ability to address root causes of poverty and expand a quality of life that is still unknown to many people around the world. Meeting the needs of people in emergency situations, whether caused by natural disaster, conflict or climate, is a strongly held American value, part of American tradition and in America’s best interests. A world where people are safe, secure, stable, fed and able to be productive members of their economy is a safer, better world for us all.

At a time of unprecedented need, we urge Congress to support a strong International Affairs budget at the current FY17 and FY18 levels and to oppose any deep and disproportionate cuts to critical, life-saving foreign assistance programs. Additionally, we urge the Administration to follow through on the commitments made in the Safe from the Start Initiative, which fosters new efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence from the onset of humanitarian crises.

Endnotes: