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Tools for Change: Emergency Management for Women

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Emergency Management for Women

Introduction

In the last decade, major life threatening disasters have occurred throughout the world. Social scientists have reported on the effects of a disaster on people, infrastructure, lifelines and the economy. Rarely have they reported on gender-specific violence. Only recently has violence against women during and after disasters become the focus of some sociological research.

Violence against women is endemic. During and after disaster, this violence increases. Many factors may deter women from reporting violence or seeking protection during and after disaster. These factors may include lack of transportation, lack of means of communication, closed or damaged courtrooms or police stations and/or living in refugee camps. Homelessness and overcrowding, reduced income, health problems, lack of transportation, disrupted social services and other effects has been shown to impact women disproportionately. These are the realities for women after a disaster.

If the delivery of services is hindered due to the effects of a disaster, large numbers of women will go without access to their primary lifelines. Disaster effects can be mitigated by having a plan in place that indicates what actions should be taken, when and by whom.

The remainder of this document is made up of a series of *tasks* to assist women to form groups within their communities to develop emergency plans and support for each other.

The Window of Opportunity

The damage caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding affects all elements of society and government. Women, children and the elderly are especially hit hard as these events may:

- Severely restrict and overwhelm response resources, communications, transportation and utilities.
- Leave many women and their neighborhoods cut off from outside support.

It takes time for emergency response agencies to set up and prepare for an organized effort, and damaged roads and disrupted communications systems may restrict access into critically affected areas. During the initial period immediately following a disaster, women and their neighborhoods will need to rely on their own resources for:

- Food
- Water
- Medical or First Aid
- Shelter

Planning, survival skills and mutual aid within women's networks throughout their neighborhoods are essential measures in coping in the aftermath of a disaster.

Women and Community Preparedness

Community based disaster preparedness planning and education allows women to prepare for and respond to the anticipated disruptions and potential hazards following a disaster. As women we can prepare our homes and families to cope during that critical period. Through pre-event planning, neighborhoods can work together to help reduce injuries, loss of lives, and property damage. Neighborhood preparedness will also enhance the ability of women in their neighborhoods to reduce their emergency needs and to manage their existing resources (even if few) until "organized assistance" becomes available.

Studies of behavior following disasters have shown that women working together in the disaster period perform more effectively if there has been prior planning and training for disaster response. These studies show that organized "grassroots" efforts may be more successful if they are woven into the social and political fabric of the community – schools, places of worship, women's groups, workplaces and other organizations.

Effective response therefore requires comprehensive planning, education, and coordination of all that will be involved in the community. With training and information, women and community groups can be prepared to serve as a crucial resource capable of performing many of the emergency functions needed in the immediate post disaster period

How Women's Neighborhood Teams Operate

As each woman's neighborhood team is formed, its members select a team leader, and alternate who will work with members and their families to prepare and respond to disasters. The team will identify an emergency meeting location for families to gather to reunite after a disaster.

Women who encounter no need in their immediate area will take on assigned roles based on the overall area need and will assist other women and their families who find themselves in a heavily affected location.

The Women's Neighborhood Team can provide an effective first response capability. Acting as individuals first, ensuring that their family is safe and then later as part of the women's team, trained women can make life saving differences in a disaster. Trained women can "fan-out" in their neighborhoods, putting out small fires, performing light search and rescue, and rendering basic first aid.

Awareness, commitment, and skills must be reinforced through follow-up training and repeated practice in order to ensure an effective response in the face of an emergency or disaster. This training provides valuable networking for women's groups in the local area.

Creating Women's Neighborhood Teams

There are many differences throughout our communities when we begin to organize women's networks, however there are common tasks that will assist women when they begin to organize.

Task One	Determine the size of your neighborhood, who lives there and any special concerns.
Task Two	Identify the types of hazards and their potential effects and impacts to your neighborhood.
Task Three	Encourage women and their families to become personally prepared and learn what to expect from a disaster and how to cope.
Task Four	Encourage women to participate in the development of a Women's Neighborhood Team and volunteer for one of the areas that will need response.
Task Five	Identify what resources are available in the community.
Task Six	Encourage the women to participate in training and education.
Task Seven	Encourage the community to work together and establish a network with other women's groups, non-profit organizations and the local government.

Each task may be customized and expanded depending upon the specific requirements and needs in each neighborhood or community. The key for the success of the women in these teams is working together in partnership towards emergency preparedness.

Women who have experienced disasters such as earthquakes or floods have witnessed the way in which women naturally come together to help one another. A team of women with a variety of skills will have a much greater chance of survival following a disaster than an individual woman trying to cope on her own. Working together will also likely speed recovery of the neighborhood and community as well.

Once the team has been formed, training and education is needed to formulate a neighborhood emergency response and recovery plan.

Training and Education

It would be ideal if all women in a neighborhood participated in planning for disasters or emergencies **before** they occur. However, some women may not be willing or able to participate in training for the Women's Team. Experience has shown that after a disaster, non-participants will likely offer their help. Trained women should be prepared to provide instruction and assistance to these women to ensure that the tasks are performed properly. Team Leaders should ensure that they are encouraged to help and that appropriate direction is given.

A basic Women's Neighborhood Team may include:

- Team Leadership
- First Aid (medical care)
- Fire Suppression
- Light Search and Rescue
- Communications to Emergency Response personnel
- Shelter and Care Giving to families
- Damage Assessment of the neighborhood and / or Community

The team structure needs to be flexible and should be adapted to the neighborhood's needs and resources. For example, families in a multi-story apartment building will likely need to organize their teams differently than those in single family dwellings as well as teams that live in a rural community as opposed to teams living in urban centres.

Expectations and a Trust Climate

It is important that women are able to identify what their expectations, roles and responsibilities are when they join the women's neighborhood team. Their participation must be as equal members on the team.

In the past there have been obstacles to participation that have included:

- Past Experiences and/or Disappointments
- Not meeting the needs of the women
- "Snake Oil and Razzle Dazzle"
- Ivory Tower mentality of trainers / teachers
- Told or ordered to participate
- Too busy with family

Common Barriers

When new women's groups form there is great excitement and high expectations that much will be done. What usually happens is that a plan has not been established and the women's energy soon is lost without direction on what can be accomplished. Many times it is the leadership, or lack of leadership, that creates barriers in education and training. Sometimes trainers from outside of the neighborhood create these barriers.

Rate of speech may be too fast for some of the women.

One-way communication may occur when trainers "believe" that they are the experts.

No feedback is requested from the women and as such the trainers do not know if transfer of knowledge is taking place.

Ineffectiveness of the material being used in the training programs is not relevant to the women and does not relate to their community's needs.

No visual contact with the community and the context of the potential emergencies leaves trainers without an understanding of what the community is facing.

No common language between the trainer and the women usually demonstrates that the trainer has not taken the critical time to understand the priorities of the women.

Frustration on the part of the women who feel that their needs are not being addressed.

If we are to assist women to take control of their lives in emergencies and disasters we must understand what their needs and concerns are in their communities. We do this by listening to what women are telling us. We then try to understand the context of the women's community and finally we must try to provide the opportunity to assist women to react to the needs of their community.

What Should the Goals Be?

Working with women's groups to prepare themselves for natural disasters we need their:

- Attention and discussion of the needs in their communities
- Understanding of what is expected and what knowledge is needed
- Actions to take control of their lives and help their families survive.

Disasters and Domestic Violence

Disasters are happening somewhere all the time. Women preparing now for natural disasters also are able to prepare for the potential of increased domestic violence that may occur after the response phase of the disaster is over. The power of a Women's Neighborhood Team that is in place in a community, is a strong tool for women who may become victims of domestic violence.

The Women's Team expands to offer safety to women in their communities after a disaster. Included in the team's role of shelter and care giving is knowing how to help a woman who has been involved in domestic violence.

Critical Questions and Support

How do you help women of domestic violence who seek help from your Women's Neighborhood Team ?

Is there an outreach program on your team for women of domestic violence?

Has your team appointed an advocate for women of domestic violence?

Have you established treating domestic violence in your community as a priority?

Does your team have bulletins, posters, workshops and/or seminars on this subject?

Working together the Women's Neighborhood Team helps to protect their community not only from natural disasters, but also recognizes that members of their community may become victims of domestic violence after a disaster.

Summary

One way for women to become stronger in their communities is to organize themselves into groups where they can meet together. Group activities should be things that the women find interesting and worthwhile for their families and their neighborhoods.

Meetings should be both informative and interesting so those women will want to attend and participate. The meetings should also be used to train its members and improve their skills in emergency management for their neighborhood teams.

Women who choose to help others in their communities provide a valuable service before, during and especially after disasters. They provide comfort and support and encourage self-sufficiency in their neighborhoods. Women recognize that the most important goal is to help people to help themselves.

Developing neighborhood response programs does not need to be a complicated process. It needs to be credible, understandable and the information must reach the intended audience. Close cooperation is needed between technical specialists, educators, women's groups, non-profit organizations and local government if we are to make a difference to the people at the disaster site.

Women are strong communicators. They are motivated to protect their families and frequently spark the change needed in their communities with their commitment to make their communities a better place live.

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