

# Human Security in Emergencies and Conflict Theme Communiqué

## Panel discussion: **Women's leadership in humanitarian crises**

13 January 2011, London, UK

**Panelists:** Jennie Richmond (Head of DFID's Humanitarian Group in the CHASE Department), Kate O'Brien (manager of Save the Children's Humanitarian Capacity Building Programme), Farah Kabir (CD, AA Bangladesh), and Maureen Fordham (Principal Lecturer in Disaster Management at Northumbria University). Jane Esuantsiwa Goldsmith (Independent consultant and AAUK Trustee) chaired.

### Purpose of the discussion

Disasters are becoming more frequent and impacting poor communities with higher intensity. Disasters have a disproportionate impact on women - they take longer to recover from disasters and they may not recover as fully. By not fully considering the gender dimension in humanitarian crises we have inadequately represented the interests of those most affected by disasters. This panel discussion aimed to provide food for thought in relation to women's leadership for the development of AA's new strategy.



Photo: Panelist Kate O'Brien addresses the audience Photo: ActionAid

### Presentations from panel members

**Maureen Fordham: "networks and networking"** – The Gender Development Network (GDN) supports women to assume leadership positions on the basis that they are agents of change. GDN works to make women visible – and audible – in both disaster response and Disaster Risk Reduction. GDN's sister network, GROOTS, recognised and develops the existing leadership skills and capacities of women.

**Farah Kabir: "women's leadership in humanitarian crises – opportunity vs. opportunism"** - Existing gender discrimination and the role of women as family custodians means they are hardest hit by disasters. The psychosocial impact of disasters is often underestimated. Do disasters provide a real opportunity for women to assume leadership positions, or is taking such roles is opportunistic (ie. if it were not for the crisis, would they have been able to climb the leadership ladder, and is the opportunity sustainable beyond this?).

**Kate O'Brien: women's leadership in the humanitarian sector** - In operational response, women encounter obstacles to professional advancement. Save the Children is currently running a leadership programme which aims to facilitate women's rise to leadership roles. Is there a key role for women to play in humanitarian crises and how can this be realised given the obstacles facing today's women?

### Questions and discussion points from the floor:

- Gender and refugee camps, and the issue of sexual exploitation of women and girls by humanitarian workers
- Is it too late to think about women's leadership during disasters – should this not be facilitated before and continue after the disaster?
- Different generations of women hold different potential for engaging, eg. grandmothers brokering peace in Afghanistan
- How much do we and should we invest in women's leadership?
- How can we recruit, retain and advance female humanitarian workers who show leadership potential?

### Panel members' responses:

- In any disaster or conflict situation it is important to create women and child-friendly spaces. These can assist with the psychosocial recovery of women and also offer some protection from abuse
- Ideally we need to facilitate women's leadership before a disaster hits, rather than during. If change is opportunistic there is a danger that they may face a backlash or find that doors are closed for further opportunities in the months and years following a disaster
- DFID is investing in gender training for all field staff, to raise awareness of the need for gender analysis to inform all programmatic work
- Humanitarian agencies need to be proactive in looking for leadership opportunities for women, and providing necessary support

### Conclusions – from the discussions we heard that:

- **women and girls enjoying their rights is a question of justice.** These rights are often most compromised in disasters and conflicts
- structural inequalities, pre-existing gender discrimination and unequal power relations bring about the **disproportionate impact of disasters on women.**
- disasters **provide an opportunity for women's empowerment**, however investment is required if their leadership is to be sustainable
- there is a need to **ensure greater representation of women** in all aspects of humanitarian work, including climate change and DRR
- **gender analysis should be central to everything we do** – if we don't incorporate a gender angle from the start we risk getting it wrong
- at community level we need to a) **invest in preparedness** and link response and recovery to the wider development process to ensure sustainable change, b) **widen the cultural space** available for women to become leaders at local, national and international levels, c) **invest in different approaches for different generations** of women, and d) work to **link grassroots women's networks (locally and internationally)** with other actors
- within the humanitarian sector we need to **facilitate working environments** that are conducive to women's advancement and leadership, as well as invest in **building their skills, capacity and confidence**
- we need to look at how to **influence the wider humanitarian architecture** on issues of women's leadership in humanitarian crises
- **men have an important role to play** in facilitating sustainable women's leadership