



Women's Rights & Leadership in Humanitarian Action

ActionAid is a global justice organisation working with women to fight injustice and claim their human rights in 45 countries. ActionAid considers humanitarian crises as part of the cycle of rights denial and poverty, whereby conflict and disaster impact those who are most vulnerable and deepen existing inequalities in access to decision making and resources. Advancing women's rights in emergencies, and specifically promoting women's leadership in disaster preparedness, response and recovery, is part of ActionAid's core humanitarian signature and a critical strategy for shifting power to women.

In 2013, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognized ActionAid's approach with the "Lighthouse Initiatives 2013 Award" following Cyclone Mahasen, where ActionAid Bangladesh pioneered a model of women-led emergency response. Cyclone Mahasen destroyed more than 49,000 homes in rural areas and devastated crops and livelihoods. ActionAid Bangladesh recognized local women's capabilities and supported women's groups to lead the emergency response, from damage and needs assessment through to procurement and monitoring of distributions. There was some initial community resistance to seeing women take these roles, but with decision-making power and funds in their own hands, women were able to overcome their detractors. Today these same women continue to work collectively on awareness-raising to reduce disaster risk among women living in poverty.

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It's a totally new experience for us. Generally our men folk do this kind of work such as purchase of building material, hiring carpenters etc. We didn't know anything about them. But we now know what to do and how.

Sufia Begum, member of Women Led Emergency Response implementation committee, Bangladesh.

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Drawing on the success of experiences like Bangladesh, ActionAid has defined 10 principles to guide emergency response work across the federation's humanitarian and resilience programming. These principles aim to ensure that women's rights are central to any response, and that women's leadership and protection are at the forefront of ActionAid's efforts.

Table 1. Women's Rights, Leadership and Protection in Emergencies: Guiding principles

1. Women's rights as a non-negotiable
2. Taking sides with the poor and excluded
3. Recognize and build on women's existing capacities
4. Address barriers to women's leadership
5. Strengthen women's access to resources
6. Create safe spaces for women to organize and mobilise
7. Promote women's equal participation at all levels
8. Embed community-based, women-led protection mechanisms
9. Campaign against structural causes that impact women's resilience
10. Drive a transformative agenda

In 2015, ActionAid commissioned an independent review of women's rights in ActionAid's emergency response work, which assessed recent emergency responses in Gaza, Haiti, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines and Vanuatu. The review highlighted the organisation's contribution to the humanitarian sector through its focus on women. ActionAid's practical, rights based approach and standalone women's rights programming were identified as unique among NGOs operating in the humanitarian sector. This, together with ActionAid's focus on and advocacy for women's leadership in preparedness, response and recovery are ActionAid's trademark. ActionAid recognizes complementarities with the approaches of key NGOs working on gender equality in emergencies and the opportunities for greater collaboration across the sector to promote the importance of women's rights in emergencies.

Key learnings for strengthening women's rights programming in emergencies

The independent review highlighted many valuable learnings for future programming in this area, including the importance of **women's rights being a non-negotiable in emergency response** programming, and promoted from the outset. Effective programmes have an explicit focus on women, recognizing that disaster and conflict increase women's vulnerability to poverty, violence and other human rights violations. Where objectives for emergency response programs prioritise women's rights, and where senior leadership emergency response programs prioritise women's rights, and where senior leadership supports this focus, results are visibly stronger. Without this explicit focus, programming runs the risk of being gender-blind or diluted.





VANUATU

Photo: ActionAid



Photo: ActionAid

the PHILIPPINES

Women’s rights central to objectives: Vanuatu.

ActionAid’s Emergency Response Plan to Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu was designed to build safe spaces for women to organize and develop a strong voice to strengthen women’s leadership on protection issues post Cyclone Pam and in future disasters that directly impact women. To deliver this vision, the project had two clear areas of focus: to develop women’s leadership, rights awareness and disaster risk management capacity, and to mobilise women to take collective action on protection post-disaster. In the immediate aftermath of the Cyclone, ActionAid established information centres which provided information on rights and entitlements for women, especially around relief efforts. The ‘blue tents’ also provided much needed spaces for women to come together and talk in a way not normally possible. In the recovery phase, these centres transformed to facilitate the establishment of permanent women’s forum in two of the worst affected areas. Today there are 3,700 women engaged in the Women I Tok Tok Toketa women’s forums in Tanna and Erromango, who are mobilizing to voice their demands with local and national decision makers using their increased rights awareness.

The review also found evidence of consistent engagement and support of women as first responders in emergencies, **building on existing capacities.** Women play multiple roles in relief and recovery activities supported by ActionAid, as participants, organisers and leaders. Investing in women and their institutions is identified as an important factor in ensuring success and sustainability of emergency response and recovery. Strategies to bring women together to build knowledge, confidence and skills to work collectively have been effective in providing opportunities for transformative leadership, even in challenging contexts, such as rural eastern Kenya. A key ActionAid approach for building solidarity and empowerment for women is REFLECT-Action, which brings women together to develop their rights awareness, relationships and a collective vision and actions for change.

Investing in women and their organisations: the Philippines

Lorna is now the leader of a local women’s organisation called UKTO that was set up in February 2015 to strengthen women’s empowerment, prevent violence against women and children and access support from the municipality for their villages. In the early stages, ActionAid and local partner PPKK supported women like those now involved in UKTO with relief items including household items and shelter repair kits after Typhoon Haiyan. More recently, training has been provided to UKTO members in farming techniques, craft making, women’s rights and disaster risk reduction.

“ Before PPKK came we felt like we were slaves, we didn’t have freedom or know the rights of women. Now we are aware of the Magna Carta of Women, we women can claim our rights, now we can stand up and practise them. ”

Philippines Evaluation, 2015, p30

ActionAid is increasingly working to **advance women’s leadership in emergencies**, which contributes to women’s empowerment and transforming women’s position in households and communities for the long term. Strategies include training on women’s rights, promoting women’s engagement as leaders with relief partners, working with women’s organisations, providing safe spaces and placing resources directly in the hands of women. **Supporting women’s participation in community decision making and consultation** has also been facilitated through emergency response programming. For example, the independent evaluation (2015: 89) undertaken of ActionAid Kenya’s drought response program found that

“ The committees set up by ActionAid required that women were in leading position, and we found impressive changes in their power to participate in decision making. ”

ActionAid internationally has set a target of ensuring that 50% of all humanitarian staff employed by ActionAid and local partners are women.

Increasing **women's access to resources** has also been identified as important in advancing women's leadership in emergencies. Most of ActionAid's responses include significant cash grants or livelihood programs which have increased women's access to resources. Further, where 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 preparedness planning committees, to ensure that planning reflects women's priorities.

Safe spaces for women in emergencies

have also been found to be instrumental in supporting long-term transformation for women, when they offer more than refuge. Safe, inclusive, women-only spaces can foster women's leadership, agency, and collective capacity to challenge rights denial, including violence and abuse in times of crisis. The review of ActionAid's emergency response work noted that many agencies support safe spaces for women, but ActionAid's **use of safe spaces to support rights awareness, agency and solidarity** is distinctly different. This is emerging as a key feature of ActionAid's women's rights in emergencies signature.

Safe spaces

In Nepal, ActionAid has built permanent women and child friendly spaces that provide information and referrals relating to GBV for earthquake affected women. These have enabled women to access information and begin to learn about their rights, as well as providing a much needed reprieve from the increased burden of unpaid work post-disaster.

In Gaza, a program which provided psychosocial support for women after the recent conflict is being transformed into physical women's centres which will provide rights awareness, legal advice and spaces where women facing rights violations can be supported to see children affected by custody disputes or seek advice over inheritance laws and women's rights.

ActionAid is establishing strong foundations for **community-based, women-led protection programming**, through its emphasis on rights awareness, and provision of protective mechanisms such as safe spaces, women's participation and leadership and access to resources.

Relief does not need to be addressed in ways that make people passive recipients. On the contrary, it can be a formidable opportunity for empowerment and transformational changes.

Kenya Final Evaluation 2015, p.77

Organizational commitment to women's rights in emergencies

has been a critical success factor in ActionAid's emergency response programming. ActionAid places women at the centre of its human rights based approach, and has extensive experience in supporting women to challenge poverty and realise their rights. The organisation also has also invested in building its capacity to deliver. Critical to this has been the strong political commitment and supportive leadership in the organization, in particular within the international humanitarian team, drawing on the expertise of ActionAid countries around the world. This commitment is also demonstrated through programming which places women's rights front and centre of emergency responses, and mobilises resources specifically for women's rights outcomes.

The independent review found that ActionAid's internal policies and guidelines clearly communicate the importance of women's rights, and tools have been developed to highlight women's priorities. The organisation's extensive practical experience in supporting women to claim their rights through strategies such as women's collectives and groups, safe spaces for women and children, rights training and awareness and local campaigns make a valuable contribution to effective emergency response programming. The final, critical factor in reaching women in emergency response has been **strong partnerships with local women's organisations**, building on their capacities, supporting women's leadership and engaging women in policy work. ■

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