
A

**Why gender
equality is
essential to
humanitarian action**

Effective, equitable and participatory humanitarian action cannot be achieved without understanding and responding to the specific needs, priorities and capacities of **diverse women, girls, men and boys in different age groups** (Box A1). Integrating gender equality also reinforces a human rights-based approach to humanitarian action which improves programming by respecting and protecting the universally recognized rights and dignities of every individual as a human being. Incorporating gender equality in humanitarian action therefore enhances the impact of humanitarian strategies and interventions. The answers to the questions, “what is gender?”, “what is gender equality?” and “why is it essential to humanitarian action?” are explained below.

BOX A1

The handbook uses the shorter phrase “women, girls, men and boys” throughout to refer to women and men of: (a) different ages, understanding that gender roles and responsibilities change across the life cycle; (b) diverse backgrounds, understanding that sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, disability, belief, civil or economic status, norms and cultural and traditional practices etc. can be barriers or enablers, depending on context; and (c) different experiences, understanding that experiences of marginalization are heterogeneous. Marginalization derives from multiple and intersecting factors.

What is “gender”?

Gender is a social construct built through cultural, political and social practices that defines the roles of women, girls, men and boys, as well as the social definitions of what it means to be masculine and feminine. Gender roles are taught, learned and absorbed and vary between and even within cultures. Gender often defines the duties and responsibilities expected of women, girls, men and boys at any given time of their lives and sets some of the barriers they may face or opportunities and privileges they may enjoy throughout their lives.

Gender, along with age, sexual orientation and gender identity, determines the power which women, girls, men and boys have and their ability to access and control resources. For instance, although international legal frameworks guarantee equal rights to women and men, the lived experiences of women, girls, men and boys are different. In most contexts, men and boys play gender roles which often hold more social, economic and political power than those of women and girls. Consequently, men and boys exercise more decision-making power and autonomy over their own lives and over the decisions in their communities and families. Conversely, women and girls often lack the power to manage their own lives, including making decisions over their own bodies, marital status and having access to social, economic or political resources.

Whilst gender is the primary focus of this handbook, a person's standing in any given society is also affected by other diversity factors such as disability, social class, race, caste, ethnic or religious background, nationality, language, economic wealth, level of education, marital status, displacement situation, sexual identity and urban/rural setting. (See annex 1 for all gender-related definitions.)



BOX A2

In emergency settings, wheelchairs provided for people with disabilities are sometimes too heavy for women with disabilities to use independently. In this scenario, factoring in the specific challenges that women with disabilities may face by accounting for their needs is an example of incorporating a gender lens in humanitarian action.

Often, sexual and gender minorities experience negative consequences for not adopting gender roles and characteristics assigned by society. Risks include discrimination, prejudice and stigma, increased exposure to violence, difficulty accessing humanitarian services and being overlooked during consultation when the protection and humanitarian needs of a crisis-affected population are identified. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTI) individuals, for example, often face a wide range of challenges and threats in their everyday lives and these can worsen in crisis settings. Moreover, LGBTI persons who speak out against violence, who do not conform to traditional roles or who speak out against power imbalances also often face increased threats of violence by community members, strangers and people within their own families and become more vulnerable to harm. At the same time, the risks and challenges faced by LGBTI individuals vary and targeted actions informed by the differences in experiences are required. For instance, as noted by the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), "although gay men in Beirut shared that they do not feel safe walking around certain areas of the city and fear being stopped by the police, they do not, on average, experience anywhere near the level of daily violence

faced by transwomen. Lesbians are a particularly hidden population, often targeted for violence within their families and subjected to "corrective" measures such as rape and forced marriage".²

The consideration of gender throughout all humanitarian work, therefore, is a powerful means to accurately identify the rights, needs, priorities and capacities without discrimination of all crisis-affected persons, particularly those women, girls, men and boys most in need.

What is "gender equality"?

Gender equality, or equality between women and men, refers to the equal enjoyment by women, girls, men and boys — of all ages, sexual orientations and gender identities — of rights, goods, opportunities, resources, rewards and quality of life. It is important to differentiate between gender *equality* and gender *equity*. Gender equity relates to women, girls, men and boys having access to the rights, resources, services and opportunities, etc. defined by their specific needs. For example, health provision that is gender-equitable would include not only general comprehensive health care but also a wide range of services, such as reproductive health, that are essential, for the specific differing needs of women and men.

In turn, gender equality means that all human beings are free to make their own choices without the limitations set by gender roles. Equality means that the diversity in behaviour, needs and aspirations of women and men is equally valued and considered. This does not mean that women and men are the same, but that their enjoyment of rights, opportunities and life chances are equal and not governed or limited by their gender and the systems that maintain it.

It is also necessary to note that gender equality is not only a women's issue but also concerns and requires the full engagement of men. While globally women and girls are most often constrained by unequal power imbalances within gender roles, the lives of men and boys are also strongly influenced by these roles, societal norms and traditional expectations. Men and boys are also held to rigid expectations of masculinity that shape their behaviour and limit their actions and responsibilities. The achievement of gender equality consequently also implies the inclusion of men for the development of more equitable relationships and equal participation of women, girls, men and boys.

BOX A3

Indices of gender inequality

- **The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (<https://tinyurl.com/p9kc9pz>) tracks education, economic and political participation and reproductive health.**
- **The World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index (<https://tinyurl.com/y7tkp6jt>) calculates the relative gaps between women and men in health, education, economy and politics.**
- **The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Social Institutions and Gender Index (<https://tinyurl.com/yczxfm4>) measures discrimination against women in social institutions (formal and informal laws, social norms and practices).**

Gender equality programming uses robust analysis of the different needs, roles, relationships and experiences of women, girls, men and boys in the assessment, planning, implementation and review of the assistance (including protection). The promotion of gender equality in programming not only increases the effectiveness of humanitarian action but also upholds our moral and legal obligations to protect the dignity and rights of all people by operating according to the principle of non-discrimination and bolstering our mandates to serve the most vulnerable individuals.

Whilst gender is a defining aspect of GBV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), *humanitarian programming that addresses gender equality and women's empowerment is not interchangeable with GBV or SRHR programming.*

GBV is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on power imbalances and socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between women, girls, men and boys. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private. Examples include rape; intimate partner violence

and other forms of domestic violence; forced and/or coerced prostitution; child, early and forced marriage; female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/O); female infanticide; trafficking for sexual exploitation and/or forced labour; and sexual violence including rape.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights refers to the right of every person to make their own choices regarding partners, family planning and the right to access information needed to support these choices.

Gender equality programming supports equal access to and participation in humanitarian services by all diverse members of a crisis-affected population. Within this framework, **women's and girls' empowerment programming** seeks to change power relations that assign women and girls a low social status in an effort to redress debilitating inequality. Such programmes regard women and girls as agents of change and focus on reinforcing their own abilities to address their own needs, thus enabling a transformative change which disrupts gender stereotypes, bridges the humanitarian/development divide and allows for long-term sustainable change.

Gender equality programming comprises two main strategies: **gender mainstreaming**; and **targeted actions** using evidence-based assessment and gender analysis.

BOX A4

A UNDP programme in Gujarat, India (<https://tinyurl.com/yagcpa9l>) offered search and rescue training to local women, teaching them life-saving skills. In addition to increased disaster preparedness, the training helped the community to appreciate the role of women and challenged stereotypes about gender roles.

GENDER AND DISASTERS, UNDP 2010, [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/YCGZGJWU](https://tinyurl.com/yCGZGJWU)

Gender mainstreaming is shorthand for saying that the impact of all policies and programmes on women and men should be considered at every stage of the programme cycle, from planning to implementation and evaluation. In crisis situations, mainstreaming a gender focus from the outset:

- Allows for a more accurate understanding of the situation;
- Enables us to meet the needs and priorities of the population in a more targeted manner, based on how women, girls, boys and men have been affected by the crisis;
- Ensures that all people affected by a crisis are acknowledged and that all their needs and vulnerabilities are taken into account; and
- Facilitates the design of more appropriate and effective responses.

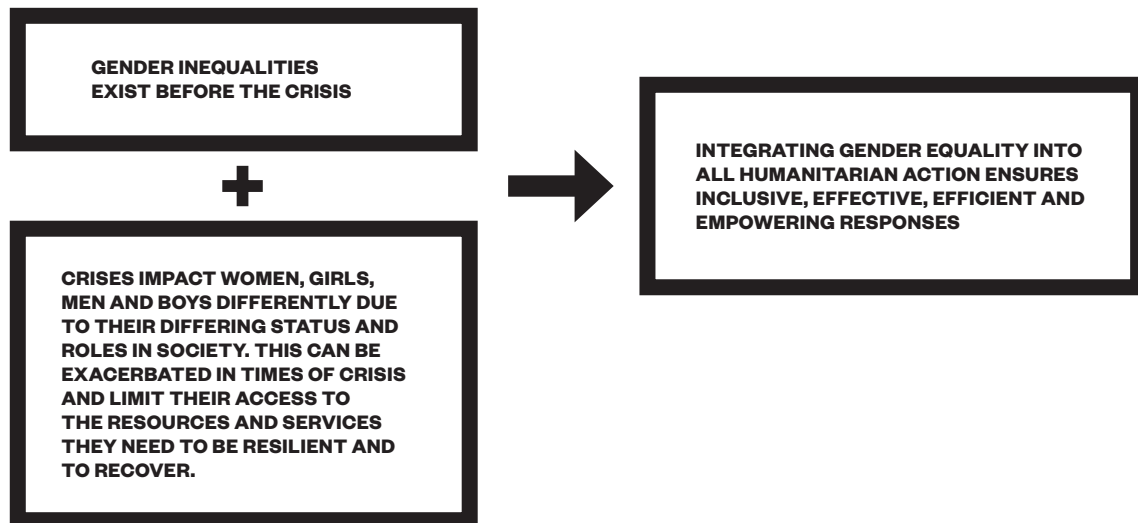
Targeted actions: Through evidence-based assessment and gender analysis, implementing humanitarian agencies can identify the specific protection and assistance needs of individuals or groups within an affected population. Addressing the specific needs of women and girls may best be done in some circumstances by taking targeted action. In effect, women and girls may need different treatment in order to produce equality in outcomes, i.e., to level the playing field so that women can benefit from

equal opportunities. This is the principle behind measures to provide special stipends to encourage families to send girls to school, for example, or to give special protection to women and girls affected by GBV.

Targeted actions should not stigmatize or isolate the targeted beneficiaries; rather, they should compensate for the consequences of gender-based inequality such as the long-term deprivation of rights to education or health care. This is important as in many situations women and girls are more disadvantaged than men and boys, have been excluded from participating in public decision-making and have had limited access to services and support. Targeted actions should empower women and build their capacities to be equal partners with men in working towards resolving conflict, solving problems caused by displacement, helping with reconstruction and return and building durable peace and security. Each sector should identify specific actions that could promote gender equality and strengthen women's capacities to enjoy their human rights.

Sections B and C of the handbook will provide guidance on how to mainstream gender throughout the HPC and how to identify any targeted actions necessary to meet the specific needs of women girls, men and boys by using evidence-based assessment and gender analysis.

Why is gender equality essential to humanitarian action?



1. GENDER INEQUALITIES EXIST BEFORE A CRISIS

Cultural practices regarding gender provide some of the most fundamental sources of inequality and exclusion around the world. The underlying roots of gender injustice stem from social and cultural dimensions and manifest themselves through economic and political consequences, amongst many others. Whilst progress has been made in reducing gender inequalities against women and girls in areas such as school enrolment,

life expectancy and labour force participation, many challenges remain. Various indices provide evidence of existing inequalities and the slow progress towards achieving gender equality worldwide (Box A3).

Gender equality exists when women and men are able to equally share power, resources and influences. Within the global context, however, inequalities are pervasive and women generally are the most disadvantaged

and excluded from accessing opportunities and independence. For instance, women and girls often have less access to education because of barriers reinforced by traditional gender roles through which women are seen singularly as caregivers, limiting their personal ambitions, talents and interests. One result of this inequality manifests as a lack of financial and social independence from men and boys. Power imbalances also make women and girls more vulnerable to GBV and domestic abuse. Due to the aforementioned lack of livelihood opportunities and cultural pressures, women and girls can be forced into marriages, limiting their personal autonomies and capacities to contribute to their communities free from intimidation, violence and coercion.

These long-standing inequalities can be addressed as part of crisis preparedness work (Box A4).³ Sound gender analysis and programming from the outset are key to effective crisis response in the short term and equitable and empowering societal change in the long term.

2. CRISES IMPACT WOMEN, GIRLS, MEN AND BOYS DIFFERENTLY

The needs and interests of women, girls, men, and boys vary, as do their resources, capacities and coping strategies in crises. The pre-existing and intersecting inequalities referred to above mean that women and girls are more likely to experience adverse consequences.

In crisis and post-crisis settings, women often find themselves acting as the new head of their households due to separation or loss of male household members. For example, one in four of all Syrian refugee families in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon are headed by women.⁴ In Mali, more than half of displaced families are headed by women.⁵ But they are not always able to access resources and life-saving support because there is no assistance for child care, and acquiring resources like food or water can be dangerous tasks. Consequently, women and girls are more likely to suffer from food insecurity in emergency settings. This creates a context in which women are more susceptible to abuse and exploitation and are more likely to be forced to engage in sexual transactions for

money and access to services. As men generally have greater control over income, land and money, their coping mechanisms differ. Additionally, due to shifting power dynamics in gender roles, women may experience a backlash from men who are unable to play their traditional roles as wage earners, heads of households and providers. Men may become humiliated and frustrated by the rapid changes in crisis settings and this may manifest as an increase in domestic violence.

Women and girls are neither exclusively nor solely the passive victims of crisis. Men and boys should not be seen solely as perpetrators of violence. Gender norms adversely affect men and boys who often are expected to risk their lives or health to protect their communities. For instance, men and boys are more likely to engage in combat and make up the majority of casualties caused by war and conflict. Similarly, boys are frequently vulnerable to forced recruitment by armed groups and are more likely to die in combat within crisis settings. Additionally, single-male heads households face unique needs, as they often do not have the skills to cook and care for young children, as these responsibilities are traditionally and exclusively assigned to women and girls.

When women and men are included equally in humanitarian action, the entire community benefits. For instance, women as well as men usually are among the responders to a crisis and play a central role in the survival and resilience of families and communities. It is their right that their perspectives be heard in humanitarian response from the outset. Often local women's organizations, youth and LGBTI support groups are well placed to respond to crisis and identify solutions in ways that can help to combat gender inequalities and barriers to inclusion in humanitarian response efficiently and sustainably.

Why gender matters in humanitarian contexts, at a glance

Crisis can exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities. Women may be excluded from preparedness planning due to their social roles (e.g., they are not engaged in first aid training or systems for

BOX A5

After the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, it was reported that women and persons of lower castes had a much harder time accessing humanitarian assistance than did men and persons of higher castes. The majority of Nepali volunteers were high-caste and sometimes prone to prioritizing high-caste earthquake victims. Female members of the lower castes were especially vulnerable due to discrimination based both on their caste and gender.

NEPAL EARTHQUAKE CASE STUDIES, DARTMOUTH UNIVERSITY 2016

BOX A6

Repeated droughts over the past 10 years in the Sahel region in Africa have generated chronic and at times severe food and nutrition insecurity. Throughout the Sahel, women are more vulnerable due not only to the crisis itself but also to the social, cultural and economic discriminations they face. In Niger, CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association programmes have helped women to form collective saving groups to strengthen and diversify their livelihoods. Through CARE's gender-transformative approach, the programmes have strengthened women's resilience. The accumulation of productive assets and food stocks as well as increased adaptive knowledge have strengthened solidarity and reinforced women's confidence. As a result, beneficiaries are better prepared for future shocks and ready to assume leadership roles in the community.

CARE INTERNATIONAL, EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS AFFECTED BY CRISIS, 2016

early warning). Their socially prescribed roles can make it difficult to seek safety (e.g., caretaking, restrictions on travelling alone or on staying at shelters with non-related men). Young men may face forced recruitment into the military or armed groups. As economies are strained, for instance, girls are frequently withdrawn from school to support the home or forced into early marriage in the hope that they will be provided for and better protected.

Women, girls, men and boys have specific needs during a crisis. Pregnancy-related death is the second leading cause of death for women in any context and 60 per cent of such deaths happen in humanitarian settings. Risks of sexual violence are also experienced differently based on gender and gender roles, with an estimated one in five refugees or displaced women in complex humanitarian settings experiencing some form of sexual violence.

Women, girls, men and boys have specific viewpoints and capacities. Differing roles and life experiences often lead to varying perspectives as how best to respond in emergency situations. By tapping into these differences, humanitarian workers can better target diverse groups and especially those individuals most in need of support.

3. INTEGRATING GENDER INTO ALL HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING IS THEREFORE ESSENTIAL

When women and men are included equally in humanitarian action, their entire communities benefit. As members of crisis-affected communities, women as well as men are among the first responders and play a central role in the survival and resilience of their families and communities. As such, their inputs into identifying humanitarian needs and potential solutions are crucial in formulating any response. Local women's groups, youth, persons with disabilities of both genders and LGBTI groups, where they are active, are often well placed to

mobilize change, identify solutions and respond to crises in ways that can help to combat gender inequalities and barriers to inclusion.

The integration of gender into humanitarian programming helps to ensure that the particular needs, capacities and priorities of women, girls, men and boys — related to pre-existing gender roles and inequalities, along with the specific impacts of the crisis — are recognized and addressed. **Achieving gender equality and promoting women's empowerment in humanitarian action ensure that the response is equitable and both establishes and protects the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons.** Gender equality programming contributes to realizing the right to meaningful and relevant participation (including by girls and boys and older men and women), affords protection, increases access to assistance and self-reliance and promotes transformative change. It also leads to better quality and more effective humanitarian outcomes for individuals, households and communities. The key benefits of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in humanitarian action include:

A. Facilitating the right to participation

During times of crisis, the impacts, risks and coping mechanisms of women, girls, men and boys may differ. The equitable input, meaningful participation and active leadership of women, girls, men and boys throughout the programme cycle help us understand these changes and adapt assistance accordingly.

B. Affording protection

Crisis-affected women, girls, men and boys are exposed to distinct protection risks. Understanding the gender-specific nature of these risks is critical to avoiding harm and facilitating protection. For instance, gender analysis

helps to determine whether men and boys may be more at risk of forced recruitment into armed groups, forced labour and/or killed, whilst a lack of suitable shelter, overcrowded displacement sites and food insecurity can place women, girls and boys at heightened risk to all forms of GBV, including survival sex, sexual exploitation and abuse.

C. Increasing access to assistance

Since crises deepen gender inequalities, promoting gender equality in all responses is essential to ensuring that women, girls, men and boys can access assistance safely. By understanding how gender plays a role in restricting access to assistance, we can better facilitate inclusive access to services for all including marginalized populations: adolescents; people with disabilities; single heads of households; LGBTI individuals; and older men and women (Box A5).

D. Promoting transformative change

Whilst humanitarian emergencies can compound discrimination and exacerbate risks, crises can also provide opportunities for addressing inequalities and promoting transformative change (Box A5). Crisis changes social and cultural structures quickly, which can serve as opportunities to redefine gender norms and contribute to the balancing of power in gender relations. The potential for transformative change addresses the structural causes and consequences of gender inequality, with the aim of achieving lasting, empowering change in the lives of women, girls, men and boys. Different strategies and approaches can be adopted to ensure that the human rights of women, girls, men and boys are promoted equally and that gender equality is achieved. The ability of local women and women's organizations to take an active, leading role in the aftermath of a crisis is a testament to the potential for transformative change.

The ongoing discussions on the humanitarian-development nexus recognizes that meaningful and sustainable impact in the context of fragile States, disasters and conflict requires complementary action by humanitarian and development actors. As such, the empowerment of women and girls should extend not only to their roles in crisis response, but also in development assistance, peacebuilding and security, mediation, reconciliation and reconstruction, and conflict and crisis prevention. The inclusion and leadership of local women is crucial to the successful outcomes of these efforts and should be facilitated and enabled.

Who is responsible for integrating gender equality in humanitarian programming?

We all are. As humanitarian field practitioners, team leaders and policymakers, it is our job to make sure that the assistance and protection we provide meets the needs, capacities and priorities of women, girls, men and boys in an equitable and empowering way and that their rights are protected and promoted.

We are all accountable.

Women and girls have as much right to equal access to resources and opportunities as their male counterparts. In crisis contexts, when resources are scarce and risks heightened, the rights of women are too often ignored. As actors in the humanitarian and development sectors, each humanitarian worker and organization has the responsibility to ensure that the rights of women and girls to basic services, protection and opportunities to better their lives are upheld.