



WOMEN ARE THE FABRIC

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FOR COMMUNITIES IN CRISIS





Women are the fabric that holds families and communities together, especially during crisis.

Women give life, love and care to children, help to build and take care of the home, and feed and clothe their loved ones. In most of the developing world, women are additionally responsible for the agricultural production and local trade that help sustain their local economies. Women also weave the social fabric of their communities – working together to support schools, organize community events, and help to look after neighbours in need.

When emergencies strike, women become even stronger. In times of conflict, women may have to single-handedly ensure the safe flight of children, older relatives and the disabled across barren, unfamiliar territory, especially when men have been killed or are away fighting. In the aftermath of a natural disaster and in refugee settings, women's usual roles often expand at the same time that even basic tasks, such as water collection, become more difficult to carry out. In all these situations, women must overcome immense obstacles to provide care and safety for others even as their own vulnerability to malnutrition, sexual violence and exploitation, sexually transmitted infection, unplanned pregnancy and unassisted childbirth may increase.

In times of crisis, the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of women are often overlooked in the rush to provide humanitarian assistance. Yet targeted support to women can be one of the best ways to ensure the health, security and well-being of families and entire communities. That is why UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, works with partners to ensure that the specific needs of women are factored into the planning of all humanitarian assistance. UNFPA also addresses urgent reproductive health needs that are sometimes forgotten.

Women are endlessly resilient and resourceful, stopping at nothing to keep their families healthy during crisis and to mend their communities and nations when the worst has passed. This book is a tribute to the strength of women and a promise to do everything we can to give them the support, care and protection they need to take care of themselves and their families.

Thoraya A. Obaid
UNFPA Executive Director

WHEN EMERGENCIES STRIKE LIFE CAN CHANGE IN AN INSTANT



Conflict and natural disasters can destroy homes and communities – or drive people from them – from one moment to the next.

Forced to flee or find shelter, often with little more than the clothes on their backs, families and individuals suddenly find themselves without basic necessities – from obvious things like food and water to hygiene supplies and medical care.

Hospitals and clinics are often destroyed or become inaccessible, yet health needs persist or even escalate. Individuals also lose access to information about how to stay healthy.

Individuals may be torn away from their families and communities at the same time that security and policing break down and vulnerability to attack increases. They may spend weeks, months, or even years living on the run or in temporary settlements.

Displaced persons who are cut off from the protection and support of their families and communities may

become more vulnerable to sexual violence, abuse and exploitation.

Young refugees can also be deeply affected by the absence of role models, the breakdown of social and cultural systems, personal traumas such as the loss of family members, exposure to violence and chaos, and the disruption of school and friendships. These factors may lead to early sexual initiation and other high-risk behaviour, including drug and alcohol abuse.

In the world today, there are more than 30 million refugees and internally displaced persons. This does not include the millions more who are temporarily or permanently uprooted by natural disaster.

Women and children account for 80 per cent of refugees and internally displaced persons.

WHEN EMERGENCIES STRIKE WOMEN PROVIDE CARE



Even in times of peace, it is usually women who look after children, the sick, the injured and the elderly.

When emergencies strike, this burden of care can multiply. In many cases, women become the sole providers and caretakers for their households, and sometimes the families of others – especially when men have been killed, injured or must leave their communities to fight or rebuild.

During crisis and in refugee situations, women and girls become the ultimate humanitarian workers. They obtain food and fuel for their families, even when it is unsafe to do so. They are responsible for water collection, even when water systems have been destroyed and alternate sources are far away. They help to organize or rebuild schools. They protect the vulnerable and care for sick and disabled family members and neighbours. Women are also likely to take on additional tasks, including construction and other physical labour, and activities to generate income for their families.

In many conflict zones, women's actions also help to

bring about and maintain peace. Women care for orphaned children who might otherwise become combatants. They organize grass-roots campaigns, sometimes across borders, to call for an end to fighting.

When the situation stabilizes, women work together to mend their torn communities. They help rebuild, restore traditions and customs, and repair relationships – all while providing care for the next generation.

UNFPA supports women and girls because they are strong.

WHEN EMERGENCIES STRIKE WOMEN NEED CARE



Women have unique health concerns, from hygiene needs to life-threatening complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.

Women are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition. Vitamin and iron deficiencies, especially anaemia, can be fatal for pregnant women and their babies. Malnutrition in young girls can endanger their health years later when they are ready to start families of their own.

The stress and disruption of war and other disasters often lead to a rise in sexual violence and domestic abuse. In addition to its psychological effects, sexual and domestic violence can have severe consequences for a woman's health.

The breakdown of community norms and protection may lead to a rise in sexual exploitation.

Women's physiology makes them more vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Rape and other types of coercive sex increase this risk even

further, as abrasions and the tearing of vaginal tissues increase the possibility of infection.

The lack of sanitary supplies for menstruation can impede the mobility of women and girls and may cause them to experience discomfort, shame and isolation for several days each month.

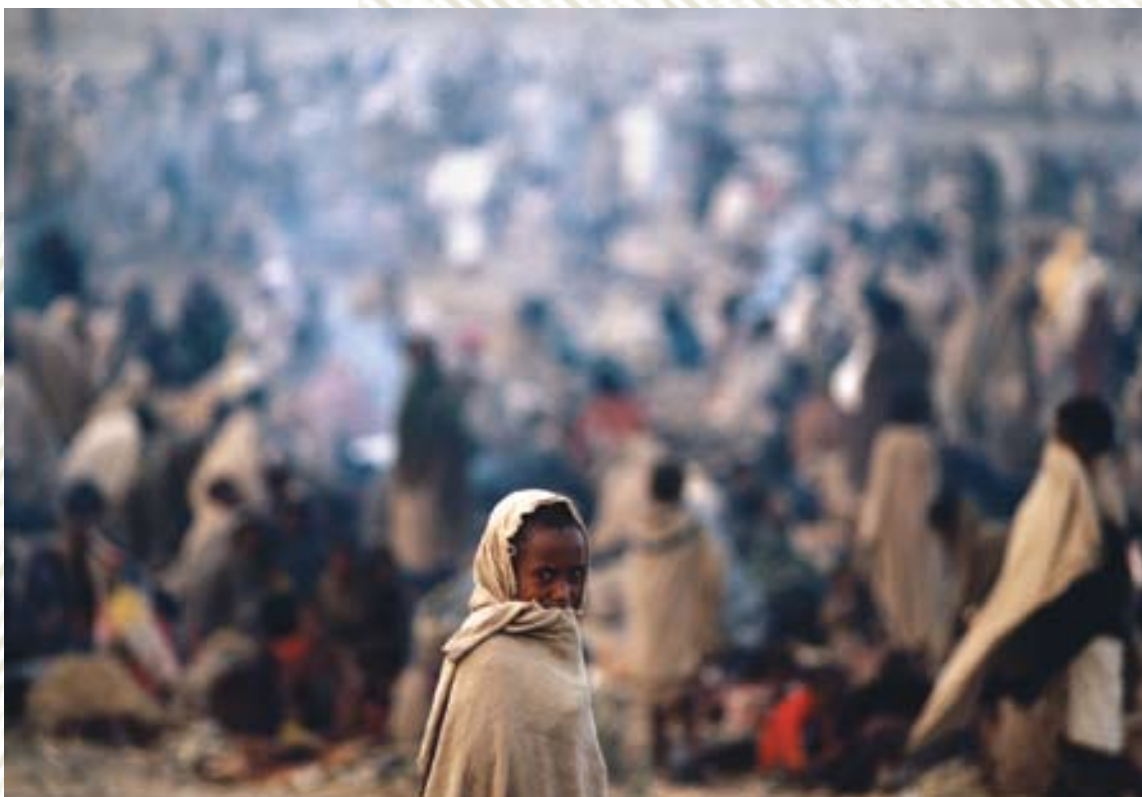
The burden of care they assume for children and others can make it difficult for women to take proper care of themselves. They may neglect their own needs as they devote themselves to caring for their families and others who need their help.

These factors can also take a toll on women's psychological well-being.

UNFPA supports women and girls because they have unique needs.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

MAKING AID WORK FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS



FOOD

Experience shows that food aid is more likely to reach the people who need it when women are in charge of its distribution. Women tend to be aware of the needs of particular families, including female-headed households. Putting food aid in the hands of women also reduces corruption and sexual exploitation.

Food programmes must also provide for the unique nutritional needs of women and girls. Iron supplements help to prevent anaemia, and Vitamin A and other nutritional supplements are important for lactating women and their babies.

WATER

Women and girls are usually responsible for collecting water. If the source is far away or in an unprotected area, this burden can be time-consuming, physically exhausting or even dangerous.

HYGIENE

Sanitary supplies for menstruation are important for women's dignity, comfort and mobility. Without them, women may be inhibited from carrying out daily tasks, and girls may miss out on school.

SECURITY

When latrines and washing facilities are placed far from living areas, women and girls may be vulnerable to attack. In many refugee settlements, women and girls may also be in danger if they must leave the safety of the camp to collect firewood and animal fodder.

Proper lighting, night patrols, firewood collection escorts, and separate living facilities for unaccompanied women and girls can mean the difference between safety and sexual attack.

UNFPA works with humanitarian partners to ensure that gender considerations are factored into aid planning and camp design.

PROMOTING SAFE MOTHERHOOD



Women do not stop getting pregnant or having babies when a disaster strikes.

In a crisis or refugee situation, one in five women of childbearing age is likely to be pregnant.

Conflicts and natural disasters put these women and their babies at risk because of the sudden loss of medical support, compounded in many cases by trauma, malnutrition or disease, and exposure to violence.

Women fleeing war may have to give birth on the run, without even the most basic items for clean delivery.

Natural disasters can wipe out medical facilities, and push many women into premature labour.

Even in relatively stable refugee or displacement settings, lack of family planning and maternal care can put countless women at risk.

Women who die in childbirth leave behind devastated

families. Their other children are more likely to die before reaching adolescence. Even those who survive are less likely to complete their education.

Urgent safe motherhood interventions can mean the difference between life and death for pregnant women and their newborns, and for other children and relatives under their care.

When crisis strikes, UNFPA sends emergency supplies and equipment to make childbirth safer and to support medical interventions where necessary. More comprehensive services are organized when the worst of the crisis has passed.

PROMOTING SAFE MOTHERHOOD

1. FAMILY PLANNING

In places where skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetric care are not available, an unplanned pregnancy can be fatal. Many couples would prefer not to risk pregnancy or have a baby during a crisis but lack the means to postpone pregnancy when family planning services become unavailable.

Neglecting family planning can have other serious consequences, including unsafe abortions resulting from unwanted pregnancies. Restoring access to safe, effective contraception protects the lives and well-being of women and children and enables crisis-affected couples to manage scarce family resources more effectively.



2. PRENATAL CARE

Prenatal care can save lives and keep expectant mothers and their babies healthy. Prenatal care helps to identify general health problems that need to be treated and educates women and their communities to recognize danger signs during pregnancy.

Prenatal care should also address the special nutritional needs of pregnant women. Health care providers must be trained to detect anaemia and other vitamin deficiencies that can put the mother and her unborn baby at risk. Good prenatal care can also minimize the risk of HIV transmission from HIV-positive parents to their unborn children.



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