



FAQs - Gender

Note: *This document has been prepared by IOM – Humanitarian Communications for the field staff of the humanitarian community. The answers have been provided by the relevant authorities. The information contained in this document changes according to the situation on ground. Hence, when information becomes outdated / redundant, it is constantly updated.*

1. What is gender?

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through the socialization processes. They are context/time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a women or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities e.g. in most societies, but not all men are primary bread earners. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age.

2. What is gender equality, and what are the differences?

Equality between women and men (gender equality) refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a "women's issue" but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development.

3. What is gender mainstreaming?

Gender mainstreaming is defined as "...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality."

4. What are gender issues?

There is growing evidence that understanding gender relations, identities and inequalities can help improve humanitarian assistance. All people are not vulnerable in the same way due to their different

roles, abilities and capacities in society. Although specifics vary from place to place, women tend to have greater responsibilities for children and the home while men have greater exposure to actors outside of the home. There can also be significant differences between women and men regarding access to education or in confidence. Understanding these differences and inequalities can help identify needs, target assistance and ensure that the needs of the vulnerable are met.

5. How is gender a cross cutting theme in humanitarian assistance?

The equal rights of women and men are explicit in the human rights documents that form the basis of the Humanitarian Charter. Women and men, and girls and boys, have the same entitlement to humanitarian assistance: to respect for their human dignity; to acknowledgement of their equal human capacities, including the capacity to make choices; to the same opportunities to act on those choices; and to the same level of power to shape the outcome of their actions.

6. What is gender balance?

Gender balance is the term given to issues relating to staffing. Gender balance is seen as a human resources issue.

7. Why is there a focus on women and girls? I thought that gender was about women and men?

Yes, using a gender analysis does mean looking at women and men (as well as boys and girls) and understanding their relationships, vulnerabilities and capacities. However, the focus is often on women given that there tend to be inequalities — in resources, past attention, understanding of priorities, respect of rights, etc. Therefore, it is often important to make special efforts to consult with women and girls, investigate their protection needs, and document their priorities, as these have not always been understood to date.

8. How can assistance be women specific or tailored to the distinct needs of various population groups or the vulnerable?

First, do not make assumptions about who does what work or has a specific priority. Do not assume that all people will benefit equally from an intervention. Check out the realities of each situation. Second, encourage participatory approaches and consultations with target populations that ensure that women's voices will be heard. Assessments take into account information and analysis about their needs and perspectives and include sex-disaggregated data, look at women's rights, and highlight any important issues that come to light through a gender analysis.

9. What constrains women participation in the decision making process?

Women's participation is often constrained by traditional exclusion, cultural attitudes, heavy workloads, assumptions by outsiders and women's own lack of confidence. Disasters complicate these issues: women's workloads increase, resources are scarce, outsiders enter communities, etc. - Women are often not consulted or involved in disaster recovery priorities.

10. What type of distress or safety issues are experienced by women, girls, boys and the vulnerable?

Gender-based violence where personal security is concerned is a key issue. Violence takes many forms. Women and girls sometimes lack documentation in their own right which is required to access resources or demonstrate right to land. The specific rights and issues of girls are often lost in the general category of children. Various agencies are attempting to bring a rights-based approach to humanitarian assistance (bringing in international law, obligations of duty bearers, etc.) There may be a lack of general awareness of the rights of women and girls.

11. How should humanitarian organizations address the varied needs and priorities of women, men, girls and boys?

The key focus of efforts is to save lives, and not whether or not someone is a woman or a man before assistance is provided or priority is attached to women over men. Using a gender perspective involves incorporating an understanding of how being male or female in a specific situation contributes to vulnerability and defines capacities. For example, presence of women health service providers in conservative areas, separate desks for women to access assistance etc. It is not a screening process to exclude those who need assistance from receiving support. There may be times when, given their different priorities and needs, women and men will best be served through the provision of different resources. Furthermore, it may be necessary to make additional investments to ensure that women's voices are heard (given inequalities in societies). But a gender mainstreaming strategy does not call for the 'favouring' of women over men.

12. What are the different health concerns for women and men?

Even though we say that women suffer disproportionately, however, it does not mean that all women suffer more than men or that their experiences are necessarily similar to one another. Like men, women are not a homogenous group.

Disaster relief efforts often fail to pay adequate attention to *specifically* female health and sanitation needs. These include attention to pre- and post-natal issues and complications such as early pregnancy loss, premature delivery, stillbirths, and delivery related complications – all of which have been noted to increase in the aftermath of disasters.

The lack of gender-appropriate health facilities and personnel made it difficult for medical teams to gain access to injured women. The absence of gender- and culturally-appropriate facilities, coupled with restrictive cultural mores and women's low social status, can create difficult situations for pregnant women.

In the event of loss of women in the households men folk experience starvation because they did not know much about cooking.

Men experience social constraints on expressing emotions about the losses suffered by them. It can increase aggression in men which are socially condoned expressions of grief.

The loss of livelihood causes distress and result in loss of self esteem for men when failing to be breadwinners. There is increase in physical burden of men by allocation of tasks, such as rescue, night patrolling, removal of debris, etc.

13. Are women engaged in economic activities or are just passive victims?

Women's economic work is often invisible and given less priority during recovery initiatives. - Many recovery initiatives use the "household" or family as the basic distribution unit – yet it is also important to understand intra-household dynamics (as resources are often not shared equally internally). Support for women's economic activities should be ideally linked to broader change initiatives aimed at changing cultural attitudes towards women. - Women may become sole breadwinners for their families on the death of spouses.

14. What is women's empowerment?

Women empowerment is the ability of a woman to control their own destiny. This implies that to be empowered women must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and employment) but they must also have the

ability to use these rights, capabilities, resources and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions such as is provided through leadership opportunities and participation in political institutions.

15. Is there a need for active involvement and support from men while integrating principles of equality?

Women may be faced with the added burden of responsibility and perhaps risk of backlash from men. Critical issues relating to survival and health are marginalized and relegated to “women’s issues”. Men may not take women’s participation seriously and this can place women in a more difficult situation. Threats or risks facing men may not be adequately understood or addressed.

16. Why does the participation of women and men matter?

If people do not participate, they experience loss of dignity, feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness and increase in mental/psycho-social illness. Women and men of all ages from the disaster-affected and wider local populations, including vulnerable groups, need to receive information about the assistance programme and are given the opportunity to comment to the assistance agency during all stages of the project cycle. Written assistance programme objectives and plans should reflect the needs, concerns and values of disaster-affected people, particularly those belonging to vulnerable groups, and contribute to their protection. Programming is designed to maximize the use of local skills and capacities.

For more information, feedback and comments, please contact
IOM’s Humanitarian Communications Team:
info.hcomms.iom@gmail.com

OR, call the toll-free Humanitarian Helpline
(From Mobile) 0322-5555737, (From Landline) 0800-44422