

## Disaster and gender statistics

- Neumayer and Plümper analyzed disasters in 141 countries and found that, when it came to deaths, gender differences were directly linked to women's economic and social rights; in societies where women and men enjoyed equal rights, disasters caused the same number of deaths in both sexes. They also confirmed that discrepancies were the result of existing inequalities. For example, boys were given preferential treatment during rescue efforts and, following disasters, both women and girls suffered more from shortages of food and economic resources (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007).
- Studies show that women, boys and girls are 14 times more likely than men to die during a disaster (Peterson, 2007).
- In 1991, during the cyclone disasters in Bangladesh, of the 140,000 people who died, 90% were women (Ikeda, 1995).
- In industrialized countries, more women than men died during the heat wave that affected Europe in 2003. In France most deaths were among elderly women (Pirard *et al.*, 2005).
- During the emergency caused by hurricane Katrina in the United States, most of the victims trapped in New Orleans were Afro-American women with their children, the poorest demographic group in that part of the country (Gault *et al.*, 2005; Williams *et al.*, 2006).
- In Sri Lanka, it was easier for men to survive during the tsunami because knowing how to swim and climb trees is mainly taught to boys. This social prejudice means that girls and women in Sri Lanka have very few possibilities of surviving in future disasters (Oxfam, 2005).
- Following a disaster, it is more likely that women will be victims of domestic and sexual violence; they even avoid using shelters for fear of being sexually assaulted (Davis *et al.*, 2005).
- Nutritional condition determines the capacity to deal with disasters (Cannon, 2002). Women are more likely to suffer from malnutrition because they have specific nutritional needs when they are pregnant or breast feeding, and some cultures have food hierarchies. For example, in south and south-east Asia, 45–60% of women of reproductive age are below their normal weight and 80% of pregnant women have iron deficiencies. In sub-Saharan Africa women lift much heavier loads than men but consume fewer calories because the culture rules that men receive more food (FAO, 2000).
- In some cases, gender differences also increase men's mortality in disaster situations. Many men are exposed to risky situations and even die because they believe that by being the "stronger sex" they need not take precautions and because society expects them to take heroic rescue action. For example, there were more immediate deaths among men when hurricane Mitch struck Central America, not only because they were engaged in open-air activities, but because they took fewer precautions when facing risks (Bradshaw, 2004).
- In Kenya, fetching water may use up to 85% of a woman's daily energy intake; in times of drought a greater work load is placed on women's shoulders, some spend up to eight hours a day in search of water (Duncan, 2007).
- Extreme weather events often create conditions conducive to outbreaks of infectious diseases; heavy rains produce insect breeding grounds, and contaminate clean water sources while drought on the other hand can cause fungal spores and spark fires. Women, especially expectant mothers, are highly vulnerable to water-borne diseases, thermal and other extreme events.
- In refugee camps that arise as a result of natural disasters and conflicts over scarce resources, women and the girl child refugees are exposed to higher risks compared to male refugees. Social strains in such situations aggravate stress levels in the family, which may result in incidences of domestic violence.