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# Gender and Disasters

## *Are we fully addressing all needs in our planning?*

Some years ago, I attended a session on women in disasters. I'm not sure what I was expecting but I know I wasn't taking the subject too seriously. That changed very quickly. As an emergency planner, I was appalled at the gaps in our planning. The issues we neglected ranged from basic issues such as the failure to include feminine hygiene products and infant formula in our logistics supply chain to issues of safety within shelters. It changed my approach to planning.

### Research Gaps

Sadly, while things have improved, we're not there yet. In a paper published in the [Journal of Emergency Management](#) titled *Rethinking our approach to gender and disasters: Needs, responsibilities, and solutions*, researchers Samantha Montano and Amanda Savitt surveyed the existing literature on gender issues in disasters. Their goal was to identify suggestions and fix responsibility within the emergency management community for minimizing vulnerability and addressing the needs of women in disaster.

Montano and Savitt identified three trends within the disaster literature:

1. Empirical research focused primarily on the vulnerability of women in disasters rather than on their needs.
2. Suggestions contained in the research literature tended to be generic rather than comprehensive and were not always supported by empirical evidence.
3. The research did not identify who has responsibility for addressing needs and implementing solutions.

### Vulnerability versus Need

The research literature examined by Montano and Savitt covered the social vulnerability of women in disasters but rarely addressed the root causes of that vulnerability. Montano and Savitt make the case that some of this vulnerability may be the result of latent needs that existed in community prior to the disaster, much in the way that disasters can exacerbate pre-existing social conditions. Montano and Savitt suggest that the vulnerability of women may be less than the literature suggests because of a tendency of some researchers to not provide context

through comparisons with men. For example, the lack of post-disaster mental health counseling may apply to all disaster victims, not just women.

The distinction between vulnerability and need is important to emergency planners. Recognizing that a portion of the community is vulnerable doesn't automatically address that vulnerability. We must determine the root causes of that vulnerability and translate these into needs that can be addressed in our planning.

Montano and Savitt identified three areas of need that we should be focusing on:

1. **Health** – women's health and reproductive care needs are often lacking in both response and recovery.
2. **Security** – women feel unsafe in shelters for several reasons, much of this insecurity centered around domestic violence and physical abuse. Returning home and dealing with issues related to the disaster (e.g. broken street lights, transients) or staying in temporary public housing can also create feelings of insecurity.
3. **Economic** – women are less likely than men to find employment in post-disaster work and are more likely to need temporary public housing.

Not all these areas of need can be addressed by emergency planners, but we can certainly use our role as coordinators to ensure they are addressed by the community as a whole.

## Rethinking How We Plan

Male planners, who tend to dominate many emergency planning teams, are not aware of the many gender-based needs that can arise in a disaster and we need to educate ourselves.

One good starting point is the [Gender and Disaster Network](#). This site provides a knowledgebase that includes case studies, academic articles, resource links, and training resources.

The problem, as Montano and Savitt point out, is that the research literature contains very little specific information to help guide our planning. Many of the research papers and resources I have reviewed deal with international disaster and tend to focus on gender equality and social justice issues.

It seems obvious but the best way to make sure your planning addresses gender issues is to commit to the concept of functional needs and to be broadly inclusive when developing your planning team. We do this routinely for many other areas, but we don't always include women or women's advocacy groups in our planning teams or make use of focus groups comprised of women. Rethinking who assists in planning is an important first step.

The second step is to go back and look at our planning from the perspective of gender needs and identify gaps and shortfalls. Some of the issues we should be addressing are:

- Security in shelters.
- Support for pregnant and lactating mothers.
- Feminine hygiene supplies.
- Emotional support services.
- Family reunification.
- Child support services.
- Transition to social services for housing, employment, education, etc.

One last thing to keep in mind. Gender needs are not limited to response. They occur in all phases of a disaster, particularly long-term recovery. 