

Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Gender Issues in Fragile Situations

**Lisa Deters and Jacqueline Hayden
Macquarie University, Australia**

Children constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in fragile situations. Emergencies destabilize social infrastructure leaving all children vulnerable. However, some children are especially at risk. Assessments of vulnerability have identified several risk factors such as age, birth order, ethnicity, tribe, urban or rural dwelling. Beyond these indicators of risk gender – the girl child, young female, and older woman - represent the most vulnerable population during emergency situations

In emergency situations relief and programming can focus on gender equity as a target – ensuring that the needs of the girl child and female population have a high priority. One of the most effective ways of doing this is through a concentration on the development or re-development of early childhood programs in post emergency situations.

Evidence shows that the girl child – often accrued with low social status under normal circumstances - becomes especially vulnerable in post-emergency and post-conflict situations. Girls, in situations where normal safety nets of caregivers and community are disrupted, are highly susceptible to violence, particularly sexual violence. They are also most likely to be taken from school due to the need to take on care and household duties, which are in disarray (Machel, 1996). The tasks, activities and status given to the girl child and the woman in families, communities and institutions pre -, during, and post - emergencies exacerbate gender-differentiated risks and vulnerabilities (UNESCO, 2006). Emergency and post conflict situations, however, can have some positive outcomes since they offer opportunities to *build back better*.

At a basic level, the development of early childhood programs involves mapping of children within the community – as part of a needs assessment exercise. The mapping activity will highlight which children are eligible for services, and thus raise awareness of needs of the girl child. Meanwhile early child programs have outcomes beyond the delivery of child-centred play and learning centres. Early childhood programs in fragile situations become *safe spaces* where protection can be offered, issues can be aired, trust can be built, solidarity can emerge and mobilization of needed services can take place. In this way early childhood programs can become the seed for community healing, reconciliation and enhanced social justice (See Connolly and Hayden, 2007).

A myriad of programs serve as examples of entry points for inclusion and raising voices of women and girls (Mathieu, 2006). Kirk (2006) advocates that emergency programming should include targeted and gender-responsive measures to ensure that girls and boys receive relevant physical, cognitive and psychosocial protection. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, UN Agencies and others such as PLAN International and Save the Children supported a holistic integrated emergency ECCE response. PLAN (2005) targeted pregnant women through the distribution of nutrients and trainings for midwives and young mothers and girls through the establishment of ECD centers. Young girls benefited from not having to take care of their younger siblings, increasing school enrolment and retention, while mothers were also enabled to participate in trainings, adult education and income generation programs.

ECD provides this critical focus on women and girls in the planning, response and recovery in an emergency situation. Again, when women and girls' voices are included in disaster risk reduction assessments, they will be accounted for in response and recovery planning. ECD responses that provide

Addressing the Needs of Girls in Emergencies
Differentiated Needs in Emergencies: Gender
Professor Jacqueline Hayden & Lisa Deters

for women and girls, through childcare, sanitation and feeding facilities, simultaneously protect and empower them. It is imperative to establish and maintain these gender-responsive ECD programs to ensure the participation and support the capacities of women and girls in emergencies.

While we have evidence of early childhood outcomes in fragile situations, there remains a glaring need to research gender issues in such situations, and beyond. We believe that situating this research in the early childhood sector will assist with the development of effective outcomes for the girl child and other female populations.

References:

Connolly, P. & Hayden, J. (2007) *From Conflict to Peace Building The Power of Early Childhood Initiatives –Lessons From Around The World*. Seattle: Exchange Press

Kirk, J. (2006). Education in emergencies: The gender implications. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok.

Machel, G. (1996). The UN study on the impact of armed conflict on children. New York: Department of Information United Nations.

Mathieu, A. (2006). Reaching the girls in South Asia: Differentiated needs and responses in emergencies. Regional Office for South Asia: UNICEF and UNGEI.

Plan. (2005). Tsunami: Six months after. Bangkok: Plan Ltd.

UNESCO. (2006). Education in emergencies: The gender implications – advocacy brief. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok.