



FOCUS HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE  
An Affiliate of the Aga Khan Development Network

# FOCUS

## Global Newsletter

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**[www.akdn.org/focus](http://www.akdn.org/focus)**

### **Editor's Message**

Welcome to the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Newsletter!

In this issue, we highlight the importance of Women in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), particularly in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Tajikistan.

*"Women hold up half the sky."*

When it comes to disasters this old Chinese proverb holds true. Often it is the women who carry their families, their villages and their communities through a crisis.

The significant role women can - and often do - play in mitigating, preparing, and responding to disasters is often overlooked by one-dimensional media portrayals of them as simple victims of disasters. Indeed, according to the United Nations Population Fund, women and children account for more than 75% of refugees and displaced persons as a consequence of humanitarian emergencies.

A study of the 1999 cyclone in Bangladesh revealed that women and children accounted for 65% of all fatalities. Women are often the most vulnerable in times of crisis because of their subordinate status in certain societies, their lack of mobility and their role as the caretaker of the family.

Despite these challenges, research indicates that women are often the first and most effective responders in times of emergencies. They focus on safeguarding the family and the community, while serving as a pillar for recovery. No matter what the circumstances, women naturally step forward to take care of the sick, injured and elderly; they anticipate the basic needs for survival such as securing food, water, shelter and attending to medical needs.

According to the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), resilient and sustainable outcomes to disasters are more likely to be achieved when women are integrated in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) planning, thereby empowering them to participate in educational programmes on evacuation and preparedness measures. In 2012, the United Nations' (UN) International Day for Disaster Reduction honoured "Women and Girls - The [in]Visible Force of Resilience." This day acknowledged the role women play in disaster management and advocated the inclusion of women as competent and effective leaders in disaster planning and response.

This vision is one that is shared by FOCUS and, as a result, is the theme of this quarter's newsletter. Profiles featured in the newsletter highlight some of the women who "hold up the sky" through their service and dedication to effectively anticipate, prepare and respond to humanitarian emergencies around the world.

FOCUS has made a continuous effort to empower women in DRR through various measures such as training and awareness programmes at the community level. Through DRR initiatives, FOCUS aims to facilitate gender-inclusive environments by involving women to enhance community resilience, enabling them to become agents of change.

As we train, educate and empower women in our units, we are also contributing to the development of the community at large. Moving forward, it is FOCUS' ambition to bring more women to the forefront of the major policy discussions and forums in order to enhance the quality and gender equality of programming.

Lastly, we would like to thank our donors, friends and wonderful staff and volunteers for their continuous generosity and support.

Warmest regards,

FOCUS Team

## Policewomen and DRR in Pakistan

Pakistan is undergoing quite a change when it comes to female involvement in the public sector. The change can be seen through the various trainings that have been made available for females to become first responders.

Many women have joined the police force, a form of public service traditionally considered male-dominated. While involved in the standard activities of a police woman, such as providing security and investigating and resolving criminal cases, these policewomen are also actively participating in response to man-made and natural disasters.

In times of disasters, female disaster response officers have proven to be an asset, as many families prefer female responders to assist female members in their family. First-Aid boxes are also readily available at police stations in the programme areas.

Noting the increasing number of women in the police force and the important role they can play in responding to disasters of all sorts, FOCUS Pakistan is providing training in disaster response to both female and male officers in Thatta and Karachi (Sindh), Chitral (Khyber Pakhtunkhawa) and Gilgit-

Baltistan. Training takes place in First-Aid, casualty assessment, managing spinal cord injuries, evacuation and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation techniques.

"The training was useful and it helped us get practical tips for handling victims," said Eed Numah, a female constable who attended the training in Gahkuch, headquarters of Ghizer district. She also said that the two-day training sessions provide ample time for theoretical understanding and practical exercise.



First-Aid training for policewomen



Policewomen being trained in medical emergency skills

## Helping Communities Reduce the Risk of Disasters

Fatima comes from the Shutor Jangal village of the Doshti district in the Baghlan province. This village is prone to multiple risks including flooding, droughts and earthquakes, which often affect the life of the community as a whole. Motivated by a passion to help others, after graduating high school Fatima chose to work for FOCUS as a Social Mobiliser. Fatima has been working with women in the remote areas of Baghlan to raise their awareness and knowledge of threatening hazards, as well as helping them to conceive measures to prepare or mitigate them.

"The role of women in my society is changing day by day. Women are able to play an instrumental role in Disaster Risk Reduction," said Fatima. As a result of her hard work, Fatima was recently promoted as Team Leader for FOCUS in Baghlan and has found herself making a difference to the lives of those in the community and, in particular, to women in the remote areas where she lives.

### Establishing the Search and Rescue Team in Badakshan.

FOCUS Afghanistan has established the first ever advanced Search and Rescue Team (SART) in the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, comprising of 24 volunteers, of which 10 are women. The team will be deployed in the event

of disasters throughout the province, and will comprise of volunteers from FOCUS Pakistan who have been trained in search and rescue techniques. The techniques include: physical and technical searches of collapsed buildings, rope rescue, casualty handling, lifting and rigging and communication procedures during operations. The team is also trained in how to use specialised equipment such as snake-eye cameras, disc cutters and thermal imaging cameras.

It was noted that the female volunteers were especially engaged and enthusiastic during the training as they were keen to serve the most vulnerable victims of disasters - who are often women and children. The programme was supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of its Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction project.

As one of the key partners in DRR, FOCUS Afghanistan - representing the international community - addressed the audience on the International Disaster Risk Reduction Day on October 17, 2012 in Kabul, Afghanistan. The event was celebrated by the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority and the UN, and the theme was "Women and Girls: the [in]Visible Force of Resilience". The Executive Officer, Ruby Ajanee, emphasised the importance of the

inclusion of women in different sectors. Ms. Ajanee congratulated the government of Afghanistan for establishing a Women's Affairs Committee within the government structure as a first step for uplifting women's role in the society. "Although there were efforts by the government to include women in different sectors, there were still very few women in decision making roles, and the government of Afghanistan has to promote it," stated Ms. Ajanee. The event was attended by representatives from the office of the Second Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Department, Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and international organisations working in the area of DRR as well as the media.



Search and Rescue Team in Badakshan

## Empowering Women for Disaster Risk Reduction

Reshma Keshwani resides within a region that is often affected by fire, floods, civil unrest, earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones. Reshma accepted her appointment as the Regional Crisis Committee (RCC) Member - Southern India region in December 2010. As a RCC member, she took the responsibility to help FOCUS promote DRR initiatives in her region and among community members, especially among those members who are most vulnerable to disasters. Reshma is the only female RCC member who has attended the workshops and programmes of FOCUS India on capacity building of volunteers, and she has also played a leading role in the implementation of all the DRR activities in Southern India.

“My journey with FOCUS began in 2010, when I attended FOCUS’ training in Mumbai and developed an interest in the Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management. I learnt that as an RCC member, I have an important role to play, which provides safety to the community in my region, especially to the women and girls. With direction from the FOCUS team and a series of sensitisation and awareness programmes, I managed to form a group of committed Disaster Management Deputies and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Members,” said Reshma Keshwani, RCC- Southern India.

Reshma has also helped FOCUS in

organising First-Aid and Search and Rescue Training for Scouts and Guides of the Mehdiapatnam and Warangal community. She helped thousands of families to develop their Family Disaster Management Plan. She has also organised CERT training for the volunteers of Hyderabad, Secunderabad and Mehdiapatnam Jamatkhana in the Hyderabad Local Council, and fire evacuation drills were facilitated twice under her mentorship. She also helped raise substantial funds during the fund raising drive for FOCUS India’s Walk for Life 2012. FOCUS recognises Reshma as a DRR role model for using her leadership to influence the opinion of women in her region and to lobby for DRR at the regional level, thus promoting DRR and Disaster Management activities in her region and beyond. Her motivation often goes beyond professional interest, spurred on by a passion for public service and an abiding commitment to build community resilience.

Worldwide, every year more than 100 million women and girls are affected by disasters. FOCUS India, through its programme, promotes measures to safeguard their fundamental rights to survival by keeping their families and communities safe from any risks. FOCUS India helps to build resilience and prepares the community to cope with any crisis situation. FOCUS has taken into account that several of its previous recovery

programmes in the wake of disasters are driven by women. Gender equality is thus an essential element of our work in building resilience to disasters in Indian communities and reducing the risk to lives, property, livelihood and livestock.

Women and girls are increasingly taking the lead in putting time, experience and knowledge to good use in designing disaster plans for their families, communities and regions. Acknowledging the need to have more women volunteers as first responders at the community level, FOCUS India aims to train at least 30% of women as CERT volunteers every year. This year in July, FOCUS has organised CERT training exclusively for female volunteers in Vapi-Sanjan Council where 32 women were already trained as CERTs. Since its inception in 2002, FOCUS India has trained over 6,000 CERT volunteers in the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. This cohort of CERT volunteers includes over 2,000 women members who are well aware of the differential vulnerabilities of women in society and their specific needs and concerns in a disaster situation.

## Capacity Building Through Gender-Inclusive Strategies

Women and children are the most vulnerable groups of society when it comes to natural disasters. This is especially true for Tajikistan, a country with a population characterised by a high outflow of male labour migration to neighbouring countries. FOCUS Tajikistan is striving to involve as many women as possible in their disaster awareness and preparedness building trainings. FOCUS Tajikistan has enabled women to become active members of CERTs and in many instances equips them to take responsibility as team leaders.

Odibekova Zebo, 41, is the head of the CERT in Khidorjev village in Roshtkala district, Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). Over the course of two years, she has taken the lead in helping her community through a series of disastrous events, both within her own village and in neighbouring areas.

At the beginning of April 2012, three households in Khidorjev village were under threat from mudflows. Zebo, in cooperation with other female members of her village, facilitated the evacuation of the most vulnerable members of the households at risk, providing them with safe haven nearby. Other female volunteers keep FOCUS Tajikistan and the capital Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defense (CoES) abreast of the evolving situation.

“We delivered first aid to at least nine people who were injured while trying to clear the mudflow and divert its stream. We also helped the victims overcome the shock by providing them with basic psychological help,” Zebo recounts.

Zebo and her team provide help not only during crisis situations, but also proactively apply knowledge and skills gained via

CERT trainings in the course of their daily lives. Last year, Zebo was driven to a village to help a man that had attempted suicide by giving him a heart massage and providing artificial respiration. This kept the man stable prior to receiving professional treatment.

Residents of Khidorjev village can recall plenty of other instances where lives and assets were saved by Zebo, her team and their skills.



FOCUS CERT volunteer assisting a community member



## A Gender Perspective...

*"Women are invaluable in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation processes if real community resilience and significant reduction of disaster impacts are to be achieved."* (UNISDR.org)

We had the opportunity to sit down with two of our Disaster Management Programme Officers, Aysha Kaba (AK) and Azmine Nimji (AN), for their perspectives on DRR.

Q: Based on your experience, why do you think it is important for women and girls to be involved in DRR initiatives?

AK: Generally, women and children are most vulnerable and are more prone to experiencing the severe effects of a disaster. The gender difference in the loss of life after natural disasters is directly related to the disadvantages that women face, such as unequal access to resources and limited ability to make household decisions, which affects their ability to receive early warnings and probability of survival following a disaster. DRR efforts, if designed and implemented using a gender-based approach, can enhance community resiliency, response and recovery efforts, and thereby increase the capacity of women and girls to better cope and recover from the impacts of disasters.

AN: Representing half the world's population, women and girls are influential advocates through their invaluable roles as mothers, teachers, and care-takers within the fabric of community. Their involvement as agents for change will be critical to root policy, planning and implementation of DRR initiatives.

Q: How has FOCUS involved women in DRR initiatives?

AK: FOCUS has aimed to involve women -- where possible and culturally appropriate in relief efforts, including in the areas of decision-making, planning and implementation. For response and interventions, FOCUS defines vulnerability

criteria that prioritises aid for women, children, elderly and disabled-headed households. In order to do this, FOCUS identifies female volunteers from Community Emergency Response Teams and other organisational leaders to assist with relief distribution and to explain the contents of relief packages.

AN: FOCUS has involved women through a gender-sensitive approach in the community. Women have been endowed with participatory and leadership roles to help protect and rebuild their communities before and after disasters.



Female CERT volunteer managing a common kitchen located at a camp in Karachi, Pakistan



Afghan women community mapping in Gund Valley



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