

AN ASSESSMENT OF GENDER AND DISABILITY INCLUSION IN PUBLIC EMERGENCY SHELTER MANAGEMENT IN DOMINICA



VIOLA PASCAL

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An Assessment of Gender and Disability Inclusion in Public Emergency Shelter Management in Dominica

Viola Pascal

University of the West Indies (Cave Hill Campus)

Institute for Gender and Development Studies

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viola.pascal@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Dominica is known to be vulnerable to multiple natural hazards by virtue of the island's location, geology and topography. Dominica has nine (9) potentially active volcanoes and is frequently affected by hydro-meteorological hazards. The most recent impact from Major Category 5 Hurricane Maria in 2017 resulted in widespread devastation that will not soon be forgotten. Emerging from this catastrophic event is the promotion of a resilience ethos and a bid to become the first climate-resilient country. The implementation of a robust Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) programme is a critical component in the broad resilience framework.

Gender is woven as a cross-cutting theme in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Disaster Risk Management (DRM) policies and programmes at the national, regional and international level mandated by agreements including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes gender as “the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed”. Research indicated that men and women, boys and girls, have different experiences of disasters with Erman (7) noting that “Gender dynamics impact the way they are affected by disasters and their capacity to withstand and recover from them”. The Haiti Gender Shadow Report released after the devastating impact of the 2010 earthquake cautioned that “A post-disaster strategy that ignores the gendered effects of disaster will inevitably fail to secure the majority of its population” (Young et al., 2).

McClain-Nhlapo (1) noted that “One billion people or 15% of the world's population experience some form of disability, with disability prevalence being higher for developing countries”. Disability inclusion is therefore viewed as another cross-cutting issue in building resilience on a social inclusive framework. The WHO defines disability as “the result of the interaction between individuals with a health condition with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings and limited social support”. In fulfillment of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the pledge by countries to “leave no one behind” (UNDP, 2018), there is the need for DRR programming to be disability-inclusive given the highly vulnerable status of Persons with Disability (PWDs) to disasters and their right to protection as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Research Problem

Dominica's National Resilience Development Strategy (NRDS) was developed in 2018 to chart the way forward after Hurricane Maria. The NRDS outlined areas of focus for various sectors while hinting at the inclusion of a gender sensitive strategy. Under the disaster management umbrella, the NRDS stipulated the construction of resilient regional shelters in safe areas equipped with appropriate and gender-sensitive amenities and the development of a National

Shelter and Welfare Policy and Plan with clearly defined roles and detailed information on the systems in place to access aid during and after emergencies or disasters (NRDS, 95). In response to the gender-sensitive mandate for all sectors of government, the research paper seeks to apply a gender and disability analysis of the operations of the National Emergency Planning Organization (NEPO) of which the Office of Disaster Management (ODM) is the Secretariat.

Emergency shelter service provision is a key activity in disaster preparedness and response. The research aimed to “*Assess Gender and Disability Inclusion in Public Emergency Shelter Management in Dominica*”. This intervention hopes to promote greater inclusion of gender and disability considerations in disaster management through knowledge building and data management systems, including the promotion of sex, age and disability disaggregated data (SADDD) collection and shelter design and outfitting that considers the needs of women who have a higher occupancy level in shelters and PWDs.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this assessment of emergency shelter service provision in Dominica:

- 1) How has gender and disability considerations been incorporated and implemented in emergency shelter management?
- 2) What is the experience of PWDs in accessing and utilizing public emergency shelters?
- 3) How can gender and disability considerations be effectively mainstreamed in the operations of the Regional Emergency Shelters?

Literature Review

The research was guided by a desk review to ascertain gender and disability inclusion in disaster management at the national level and further afield, regionally and internationally. Keywords or terms utilized in the search for relevant documents include: gender, disability, disaster management, shelter management, gender and disability inclusion in DRR, gender and disability in the Caribbean.

At the national level, there is generally a paucity of research or data in disaster management that focuses on gender and disability considerations in the provision of emergency shelter services. A local survey that shined some light on this issue was conducted in 2018 in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria entitled “**Assessment of Women and Children with Regards to Child Protection and Gender Based Violence in Emergency Shelters in Dominica**”. The analysis done by Fontaine was commissioned by IsraAid, UNICEF and UNFPA. This survey provides value to the research given the pivotal time it was carried out where participants in the survey were occupants of shelters and at that time were still navigating the “short-term” recovery period. This provided insight into the lived reality of shelterees who were able to provide

information not based solely on memory, but on their then daily experiences. Questionnaires were administered at 20 emergency shelters in Dominica to 46 shelterees who were either parents or caregivers to 108 children in the shelters. Questions were centered on availability of shelter amenities, employment, child protection, Gender Based Violence and the general well-being at the shelters. The survey identified gaps or areas for intervention to be addressed including:

- Infrastructural such as washrooms, sleep and dwelling arrangements and securing the facility
- Assistance with the provision of food, clothing and other basic needs
- Established mechanisms for the supervision of children
- Implementation of routine activities for children including those with disabilities
- Facilitate empowerment services for caregivers such as parenting skills, psychosocial support, income generating skills, self-empowerment and protection skills
- Institute formalized referral and reporting systems within shelters including those aimed
- at assisting shelter occupants recovery effort such as with housing assistance

Several gaps identified during the assessment provided guidance on relevant subject matters for this research and the unique opportunity to partially answer the question of the extent to which NEPO has improved in the provision of shelter management service since 2018, albeit not through a quantitative process but more from the qualitative interviews conducted with key NEPO operatives.

The **Haiti Gender Shadow Report (HGSR)**, Young et al. (2010), was a seminal publication following the impact of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) intended to guide reconstruction did not incorporate gender issues. Hence, the HGSR was formulated to provide the missing gender content for PDNA and all stakeholders involved in Haiti's reconstruction. The report aptly noted that "disasters amplify existing social inequalities thus it is crucial to integrate a gender perspective into all redevelopment policies and planning". A critical look at this report elicits consideration of the extent to which the Region is learning from past disasters and implementing best practices on the road to building resilience, a concern also expressed by Sheller in "Island Futures" (2020, 210). Since the release of this report in 2010, the Caribbean Region has faced several disaster events and in the case of Dominica, Tropical Storm Erika in 2015 and Hurricane Maria 2017. Many of the issues for which recommendations were made by the HGSR in a bid to alleviate the burdens of the very vulnerable including women, children and disabled persons appeared to only be incorporated on a limited basis.

Similarities were found in the HGSR and the Dominica 2018 Shelter Assessment, particularly relating to inadequate sanitary facilities in shelters, poor security, inadequate food and personal necessities and the lack or limited inclusion of women in reconstruction decisions and activities, keeping in mind the major devastation that Maria just a few months earlier inflicted on the

country. The HGSR highlighted the fact that “sanitation represents one of the most significant environmental themes in need of gender analysis... many displacement camps have only 1 bathroom for every 100 to 150 people. Women and girls have to travel long distances to access facilities resulting in a vast number of assaults against women taking place in and around bathrooms” (Young et al., 14). This scenario was also mentioned in the qualitative interview sessions with shelter managers for this research. However, unlike the Haiti situation, shelter managers in Dominica recognized the potential for girls to be assaulted around bathroom facilities and implemented a chaperoned system to prevent such an occurrence. Of the many key recommendations that were made by the HGSR, the following were found applicable to the research context:

- Create gender-sensitive, participatory disaster risk reduction and preparedness plans to help mitigate the impact of natural disasters.
- Work directly with local women’s organizations to prioritize the needs of women, children and orphans in all disaster response efforts.
- Create a national plan to prioritize the needs and rights of populations with disabilities, with special attention for women and girls.
- Prioritize the equitable participation of women and women’s organizations in the infrastructure redevelopment planning and implementation.

Nguyen et al. (2020, 6) in the UN Women publication **Review of Gender-Responsiveness and Disability-Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction in Asia and the Pacific** noted the benefit of “applying an intersectional lens rather than classifying social groups by single characteristics”. Often, disability is grouped in the broad category of “vulnerable” with no regard to the specific limitation(s) of the individual which could have a bearing on the type of assistance that is required in an emergency or disaster situation (World Bank 2017, 19). While women and girls are said to be disproportionately affected in disasters, having a disability as man or woman significantly increases the level of impact particularly in cases where social support is lacking (Smith, 2016). However, women and girls with disability still bear the brunt of the greatest level of impact compounded by factors such as limited access to safe shelter space that caters to their needs, including provision of privacy. McClain-Nhlapo (29), in **Disability Inclusion and Accountability Framework**, a 2018 World Bank publication, supported this view noting that “persons with disabilities face heightened risks and vulnerability at each stage of disaster risk management and that inadequate attention to disability needs in DRM operations can result in inaccessible shelters, lack of warnings in alternate formats, inability to evacuate, communication barriers, loss of assistive aids and challenges in obtaining long-term recovery services”. An issue that is often cited both in the desk review and interviews is that “most emergency responders and other disaster operatives are not trained on the specific needs of persons with disabilities and their families” McClain-Nhlapo (29). This World Bank report also hinted at the interconnectedness between disability-inclusive resilience and the benefits that could emanate for older persons and children.

Kontro, in the 2021 research for Connecting Business initiative (CBI) in “**Gender, Disaster Management and the Private Sector**”, captures the benefit to the overall DRR and DRM operation when an intersectional lens of gender and disability is incorporated. Kontro (18) noted that “the responsibility women have for vulnerable groups such as children, older people and people with disabilities means that including gender in disaster management has a significant influence on the response for the majority of the people who are most vulnerable to disasters”

Methodology

A mixed methods approach through the use of quantitative and qualitative data was the preferred methodology in carrying out this assessment grounded by a desk review to ascertain gender and disability inclusion in disaster management at varying levels. Quantitative data was accessed from a secondary data source made possible by an assessment of emergency shelters in Dominica in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria (Fontaine, 2018).

In addition to utilizing mainly desk review and secondary data, qualitative data was garnered through interviews with key informants drawn from the National Emergency Planning Organization (NEPO) Emergency Shelter Sub-Committee. By focusing on volunteers in shelter management and shelter training for the semi-structured interviews, the research was able to benefit from a first-hand view of emergency shelter operations in Dominica.

Data Collection Method

Four (4) women and 2 men who provide shelter management service were interviewed for upwards of an hour each. Similarly, interviews were conducted with representative from the Dominica Association of Persons with Disabilities (DAPD) to provide input of the lived reality of PWDs as it relates to emergency preparedness and response.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview questions were analyzed through a common theme approach. Information from the 2018 emergency shelter service assessment following Maria, the research questions and responses to interview questions helped to guide coding and selection of thematic areas in the analysis process. Common variables utilized in both the qualitative and quantitative data gathering instrument include composition and characteristics of shelter occupants, how the data gathered was used to inform operations, type of amenities in place for shelterees including PWDs and availability of recreational space at the shelters.

Four (4) broad thematic areas emerged from the analysis of gender and disability inclusion in public emergency shelter management:

- *Operational activities* that are normally implemented during shelter activated periods such as assigning of duties or responsibilities to shelterees (voluntary), communication on general shelter matters and relief and recovery support and sleeping arrangements. Issues of privacy often occur in the operational area.
- *Infrastructural* which focused broadly on washroom facilities, food service and accessibility which brought out the intersectionality with PWDs and elderly.
- *Psychosocial support* linked to issues of limited or no recreational space and the need for educational talks and counseling sessions for all strata of the shelter occupants.
- *Social protection measures* directed towards economic support for caregivers and financial and material support for recovery particularly for female occupants of the shelters.

Research Findings

This research aims to assess Gender and Disability inclusion in Public Emergency Shelter Management in Dominica. A recurring need for effective gender and disability analysis is the collection and availability of sex, age and disability disaggregated data (Nguyen et al. 2020, 5; Kontro 2021, 17). Hence, the research instrument at the onset sought to ascertain if SADDD collection is included in shelter operations. All participants indicated that SADDD is collected. As of 2018, shelter registration and household data collection forms have been revised to capture SADDD as well as other necessary attributes of shelterees including head of household, employment status, marital status and health condition with detailed disabilities (where applicable). These variables, as indicated by participants, are utilized to inform operational activities of shelters during activated periods primarily grouping in family clusters, suitable placement of PWDs usually near washroom facilities for ease of access, assigning duties to shelterees based on their preference, relief distribution and to provide socioeconomic support in the recovery process. Of note, disaggregated data collection is also facilitated at the community level by disaster committees prior to hazard impact (during disaster plan creation) process. This is a very valuable activity as it provides the opportunity to collate information on the very vulnerable before the onset of a hazard including single parents, female headed household, elderly (and their health condition), PWDs and any available family support which is a major consideration when evacuation and sheltering becomes necessary.

On the question of shelter composition females, some of whom are mothers and often unemployed or partially employed make up the majority of the population. As mentioned earlier, women bear most of the responsibility of being caregivers for children, elderly and in some cases extended family members with disability. Elderly men, on many occasions, arrive at the shelter

under the care of women. Note that more elderly men appear to seek shelter as younger men tend to take greater risk, evacuating late or staying back to protect property. This scenario was highlighted by Kambon (55) in the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) 2018 assessment of Gender and EWS in the Caribbean as it relates to hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. While PWDs utilized the emergency shelter with the understanding that a caregiver or family member is required to assist, they generally prefer to remain in their homes. Among the responses given for the aversion to using shelters is that “not many people know how to treat or are trained to deal with PWDs in shelters”. Value in the concept of training shelter managers was sighted by Jones and Serieux-Lubin (39) in their review on “Accessible buildings and Public Spaces” for the disabled in the Caribbean. In an effort to address this issue, the Dominica Association of Persons with Disabilities (DAPD) conducted training sessions with shelter managers to improve access to and accommodation of PWDs in emergency shelters. Infrastructural issues which impede access both for PWDs and elderly, notably lack of ramp, rails, pathways and size of stairs and amenities within the shelter are cited as deterrents to the use of shelters by the disabled community.

Persons normally remain in emergency shelters for 24 to 48 hours and the decision to deactivate the shelter is often determined based on the level of impact and extent of displacement experienced by the shelterees. With hurricane Maria being the most recent reference event and given the significant impact sustained, persons remained in shelters for upwards of 6 months with the most extreme case being 4 years. In situations where such long-term occupancy becomes necessary, it may give rise to or exacerbate existing socioeconomic and psychosocial issues some of which were identified earlier in the Emergency Shelter Assessment by Fontaine in 2018. In the area of psychosocial support, participants highlighted this as a general need for persons in the shelter. Family dynamics, however, modulates the extent to which psychosocial support is desired by men, women, boys and girls as well as PWDs. Shelterees who have a strong family network and support system present better coping mechanism. The provision of adequate space for recreational activity could be one form of support for shelterees emotional well-being, allowing for more social and creative activities to diffuse tension and to help manage the stress brought on by the disaster event.

Effective communication is essential in all spheres of disaster management. In an emergency shelter setting while some information is shared with all occupants, others may be a bit sensitive relative to the topic, audience and existing situation of individuals. Participants indicated that efforts are made to tailor communication to selected groups such as sexual and reproductive health and communication for PWDs is based on the particular limitation with the support of family members. Information sharing at times is delimited by timing given that some shelterees, especially men, would be away from the shelter during the days in the community assisting with recovery or other work activities. Therefore, times are selected usually evenings when most or all shelterees are available.

The construction and management of fit for purpose Regional Emergency Shelters (RES) are key activities in building national resilience to natural and man induced hazards. It is therefore critical that as the country continues on this journey, best practices are implemented inclusive of gender and disability considerations. The construction of RESs is one solution to reducing dependence on traditional buildings used for shelters such as schools and churches. It is envisioned that many of the issues experienced post Maria including poor sanitary facilities, security and structural concerns will be addressed in transitioning to these facilities. Interview participants provided several suggestions on how to improve national emergency shelter services while being gender and disability inclusive:

- Continue to support the shift towards family groupings in shelters a measure currently required for COVID 19 safety
- Create a framework that facilitate shock responsive social protection inclusive of economic support or employment for shelterees (particularly unpaid caregivers and single mothers) in collaboration with line ministries and other agencies
- Selection of shelter sites that can accommodate recreational space for adults and children. Include shelter managers and PWDs in shelter site selection and design.
- Ensure the design and layout of the shelters are adequate for designated activities such as food preparation and washroom facilities relative to the occupancy level and support access and mobility for PWDS and elderly
- Work towards gender balance on the shelter teams which currently are dominated by women
- Operational Plans for emergency shelters should include programs and strategies to enhance disability-inclusive shelter. Involve the DAPD in this process to promote inclusion and ensure structural integrity and operational suitability for PWDs.
- Enhance communication for persons with speech and hearing difficulties

Conclusion

This brief study was approached utilizing both a desk review and qualitative interview methods. Information garnered in the process indicated that the framework exists for emergency shelter management service to be gender and disability inclusive and is being applied in some areas. SADD collection, which is essential in this process, is clearly being done and importantly this information can be easily assimilated in the data pool to support shock responsive social protection measures and recovery for the very vulnerable. The appropriate variables to be included in the analysis presented a challenge. Going forward, it is imperative that through a consultative process, gender and disability variables be identified in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the disaster management system. This could also be found useful for other government departments for which gender analysis is required.

Recommendations

- Introduce measures to increase diversity in the composition of shelter teams which are currently dominated by women
- Include experienced shelter managers in every stage of the shelter service process from site selection and design to installation of amenities.
- Conduct community level consultation in the initial stages to better guarantee that Regional Shelters are fit for purpose
- Include PWDs in the discussion on design and placement of amenities in shelters
- Develop public awareness messaging that cater to specific limitations of PWDs
- Develop public awareness material with gender considerations to improve preparedness and response

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