



**ADVERSITY AND OPPORTUNITY:
GENDER RELATIONS,
EMERGENCIES AND RESILIENCE
IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

**POLICY AND RESEARCH
SUMMARY**



As the Horn of Africa region faces further serious drought, and dialogue continues in the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, how can the humanitarian community best support gender equality goals through humanitarian and development efforts?

CARE Australia supported a research study in 2014-15 to examine the opportunities and challenges in gender equality and women's empowerment in emergency contexts, and provide lessons for future humanitarian responses, focusing on the Horn of Africa as a case study. This paper draws on the research report to outline selected findings and conclusions of interest to policy makers.

CARE's research focus

CARE's experience and understanding of the Horn of Africa context is a region characterised by long-term structural crisis, overlain by periodic short-term emergencies such as drought or flooding. In this setting, conventional understandings of emergencies as rapid-onset disasters need to give way to a broader, resilience-based understanding of humanitarian response. Such a context is also problematic for promoting sustainable transformations in gender relations. The field research thus focused on the question: **How can CARE best contribute to positive changes in gender relations through its work in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia using a resilience approach, addressing both short-term responses and longer-term transformations?**

The research included field consultations with communities in six locations in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, with over 600 people interviewed. Respondents were asked about the different vulnerabilities and capacities of men, women, girls and boys; the changes in gender relations that their communities were undergoing; and the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and communities in terms of their ability to cope with the shocks and stresses facing them.

Looking forward, respondents were also asked what sort of changes to gender relations they had seen and hoped to see in future, and what role there might be for CARE and others in encouraging such changes, in order to gain insights into the possibilities for 'gender transformation' in the study areas.

The research covered diverse locations, including urban city and informal settlements, peri-urban and rural centres. A complex picture emerges of the 'normality' of structural crisis, with inter-related sources of stress (e.g. political nepotism, gender inequality, inadequate basic services, harmful traditional practices, resource based conflicts, substance abuse, family breakdown) combined a degrading physical environment in which groups such as pastoralists are no longer able to sustain their livelihood. Amidst this diversity, the research identified broad trends and findings.



'Research and experience have demonstrated how the failure to address the gendered impacts of crises, including sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence, is one of the biggest weaknesses and recurrent gaps in disaster responses'

– Joint statement by humanitarian agencies calling for a pledge to empower women at the World Humanitarian Summit.

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Important changes are taking place in gender relations

The main trends noted as particularly positive by respondents were:

Improved access to education for girls

and a greater acceptance of the need

for girls to be schooled

The value placed on education by all respondents in all locations was strongly evident. 'Education makes women powerful' was a commonly expressed sentiment. Education is seen as a stepping stone to employment, a means of acquiring skills for business or professional work, a passport to greater prosperity and connectedness, and a better life in more general terms.

Women's increasing participation

in economic activity

Income-generation and small business activity was everywhere seen as the key alternative to paid employment, especially for those with low educational attainment, and a major cushion for households against economic risk.

To some extent, women are also increasing their access to key economic resources such as land and livestock. In parallel with this trend, some noted an increased willingness on the part of men to share women's domestic labour.

Women are increasingly engaged in

social and public life outside the home

This includes participation in decision-making fora and election to public office, as well as membership of wider groups such as savings groups. Most respondents recognised this participation as being a valuable asset, where the women concerned gain respect and influence. In all three countries respondents identified – and regarded positively – women with the capacity and means to be articulate and to play influential roles. This ranged from politicians in Ethiopia, to poets, journalists and musicians in Somalia and Kenya.

The more negative corollary of these trends is that men are tending to withdraw from their previous roles and responsibilities. All research locations noted concerns over rising levels of addiction to drugs and alcohol.



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Further changes desired for the future

In all six locations, respondents identified more and better education opportunities for both boys and girls as fundamental to improving male-female relations, along with improving women's access to and control of resources, including ownership of livestock and other key resources. They also wanted to see: increased flows of information to all, especially women, about economic opportunities; better health services, especially maternal and child health services and especially in isolated rural areas; men taking on more household responsibilities and women increasingly participating in decision-making, articulating their views and their grievances, and taking leadership roles; communities addressing the addiction issues that were prevalent in all study locations; improvements in the economic and political environment that would be needed to enable these changes, including enhancing employment opportunities for all, but especially for men and boys; increasing family income levels generally; reductions in tribalism and clan-based conflict; and, better collaboration between men and women to improve the living conditions and prospects of young people.

How can development actors support change?

Respondents were asked what they thought development actors could do to support the community to achieve changes to improve gender relations. Many urged greater efforts to be made in education and skills training, especially in preparation for employment and income generation, and especially greater efforts to support opportunities for youth. This was a particular concern in areas struggling with the challenge of youth migration. Other recommendations were around stronger advocacy for women's rights and support to victims of gender-based violence, including working with traditional and religious leaders to bring about change in gender relations.

Respondents noted that CARE and other organisations have already contributed significantly to improving gender relations. This includes by promoting advances in education, through training for entrepreneurship and livelihoods, and by organising micro-finance groups.





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In particular, CARE's model of **Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)** were said to enhance women's capacity to cope with stress and shocks, although some men expressed resentment at being excluded from VSLAs. Other projects mentioned positively included those supporting reductions in harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation. Various criticisms of NGOs and other development actors were expressed, including most commonly a resentment of what many perceived as an unbalanced approach by agencies offering support predominantly to women.

Implications for future programming?

The research suggested directions for CARE and other actors to consider to improve approaches to humanitarian work in the Horn, both resilience building and rapid response, to further the longer term goal of gender transformation.

Building understanding of gendered vulnerabilities and capacities

The observations of the vulnerabilities and capacities of men and women in the research locations raised questions about common assumptions regarding male dominance and female vulnerability. Across the board in the communities targeted by the research, being female presents exposure to deeper levels of vulnerability and to a greater range of factors of vulnerability than being male. However, looking at the contextual detail shows that there is a fuller and more nuanced picture too. Clearly women are both vulnerable, and strong, for different reasons in different contexts and at different times of their lives.

Men too are vulnerable – such as to violence from other men, to discrimination as 'minorities', and to the psychological impact of poverty and unemployment.

This suggests that understanding gendered vulnerability requires a nuanced and contextualized approach. For example:

- Male and female capacities and vulnerabilities should be understood in relation to each other rather than addressed separately. The research encountered many examples in which a women's vulnerability rose and fell with that of her husband or other male relatives, and the same is true in reverse.
- Women's economic empowerment appears a positive trend which enables women both to cushion themselves against shocks and to raise their social profile, but its translation into real decision-making and political power cannot be automatically assumed. Further work to address major structural changes is needed if real gender transformation is to be secured.
- The assumed vulnerability of female-headed households needs qualifying. Female-headed households may lack connections with power-holders, but dependents within such households may be taken better care of than those in male-headed households. In any case the designation itself, suggesting that only when there is no man do women take on household responsibility, is seen by some respondents as demeaning to all women.

Hence, a blanket view of women as intrinsically vulnerable and men as automatically powerful fails to take account of the range of factors, both personal and structural, that affect a person's coping ability in real life. The lesson for humanitarian programming is that vulnerability is not straightforward: incorporating a relational gender lens in resilience programming will help to reveal and interpret ambiguities and nuances.



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Integrating approaches to gender and resilience

There are opportunities to develop a more integrated conceptual and methodological approach to 'gender and resilience' as applicable to humanitarian work. Applying a resilience lens may help offer a way to help understand a graduated approach to the transformation of gender relations.

For example, one framework from resilience theory could help illustrate change at three levels:

- Absorption: what level of assets do women and men need, and have, to absorb shocks?
- Adaptation: to what extent are women and men able to adapt to progressive stresses ('bouncing back')?
- Transformation: have the pressures the community is under led to radical changes in gendered power relations, are they positive for women and girls, and how could this process be assisted?

Such a model could serve as a useful tool in helping identify what gender transformation looks like in particular circumstances and how to move towards it. It could also help plot where on the resilience continuum a particular community is, and then for identifying what level of support is needed in order for women, men, boys and girls to maximise their capacities and hence minimize their individual and collective risk.

Promoting effective methodologies

Transformative change is a long term process requiring a long term commitment and approaches which address deep social norms. How do agencies negotiate the tensions if views prevalent at community level differ from those represented by the agencies and validated in global norms, how should the agencies negotiate this tension? How should they deal with the fact that not all community members hold the same views or share the same interests, and that some views may be crowded out by powerful voices? Lessons drawn from research suggest that the best role for external agencies may be less one of explicitly promoting changes in behaviour and more a facilitating one, proposing dimensions of problems that people are not able to see for themselves, providing channels for divergent interests to be given voice, and offering information to help people reach decisions about how they want to change.

Approaches such as **CARE's Social Analysis and Action (SAA)**, adopted widely in Ethiopia, respond to this need by setting up community-level dialogue on social norms, problematic practices and locally identified responses. Such approaches should be documented, further developed and promoted for wider use across the region.



Strengthening program and organisational capacity

The researchers identified possible strategies for strengthening the focus and capacity of organisations seeking to support gender transformation in fragile contexts. These include:

- Reviewing the extent to which existing Horn of Africa programs align with the respondents identified priorities for supporting change in gender relations
- Reinforcing the importance of preparedness in documenting, in advance of need, the condition and position of women, men, girls and boys, and the underlying factors that shape this, helping planners to foresee the possible long-term implications of interventions, whether short-or long-term.
- Building institutional knowledge on gender and resilience approaches, as well as local context-specific knowledge of the areas where they work
- Investing in staff capacity in monitoring and research around gender and resilience
- Developing an active learning environment within and across agencies operating in the region.
- Ensuring a more integrated approach to humanitarian response, resilience and long term development programming, avoiding structural silos between these areas.



CARE AUSTRALIA

1800 020 046
info@care.org.au
care.org.au
ABN: 46 003 380 890

CANBERRA OFFICE

Ground floor
243 Northbourne Avenue
Lyneham ACT 2602
Phone: (02) 6279 0200
Fax: (02) 6257 1938

MELBOURNE OFFICE

Level 8, 406 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
Phone: (03) 9421 5572
Fax: (03) 9421 5593

ABOUT CARE

CARE works with poor communities in developing countries to end extreme poverty and injustice.

Our long-term aid programs provide food, clean water, basic healthcare and education and create opportunities for people to build a better future for themselves.

We also deliver emergency aid to survivors of natural disasters and conflict, and help people rebuild their lives.

We have 70 years' experience in successfully fighting poverty, and last year we helped change the lives of 72 million people around the world.



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The full report, including Country Annexes with findings and reflections from research teams in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, is available at www.care.org.au/gender-in-emergencies.

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