

Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI)

**Lessons learnt from the flood disaster response
under the EiE initiative in Sindh and Balochistan
November 2024**

Introduction

The floods in August 2022 in Pakistan caused widespread devastation, severely affecting entire communities. Among the most impacted groups were those who faced multiple vulnerabilities,



including women, men, children, elderly individuals and person with disabilities. This report examines the gendered and inclusion related impacts of the floods and explores how gender-sensitive and inclusive disaster response strategies can better address the specific challenges faced by displaced populations. It highlights critical areas such as gender-based violence (GBV), increased household burdens, the disruption of education and the mental health consequences. The report aims to provide insights into how disaster response can be improved to ensure the safety, dignity and well-being of all affected

individuals, while considering the specific needs and vulnerabilities arising from the disaster.

Findings of PAGE FGDs in Flood Hit Areas:

Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education (PAGE) is implementing a project *“Enhancing the Living Standards of Flood-Affected Communities in Balochistan and Sindh Provinces through an Integrated Rehabilitation Program (WASH, Nutrition, Health, and Education)”*, funded by the International Development and Relief Foundation (IDRF). PAGE team conducted set of focus group discussions (FGD) in target areas, following are some challenges and lesson learnt from the project based on the FGDs:

The flood emergency was not “gender neutral”. Women, girls and person with disabilities (PWDs) experienced the greatest impacts of floods, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety. This disaster impacted every segment of human life; however, they disproportionately affect women, girls and PWDs, intensifying their vulnerabilities. These impacts include;

- i. Increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV)
- ii. An excessive burden of household chores and
- iii. Heightened responsibilities due to their involvement in rehabilitation activities such as house reconstruction
- iv. This also contribute to early child marriages as a perceived way to reduce GBV risks for girls
- v. Increased school dropout rates
- vi. Increased safety and security concerns

- vii. Challenges stemming from the loss of essential services like water and healthcare facilities
- viii. Women and girls face heightened reproductive health risks
 - ix. Economic losses
 - x. Increased dependency on others
 - xi. Food insecurity, and
 - xii. The loss of physical assets

Across the target districts, women depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources. In many villages, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel. Agriculture is the most important employment sector for women in target districts, during periods of flooding and erratic rainfall, women, as agricultural workers and primary procurers, work harder to secure income and resources for their families. This put added pressure on girls, who often have to leave school to help their mothers manage the increased burden. These compounded challenges underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive approaches in disaster response and recovery efforts.

The FGDs findings further elaborates the challenges and the root causes in post disaster situation like floods;

Increased Risks and Challenges for Women and Girls

Gender - Based Violence (GBV):

Women and girls reported increased risks of GBV, including sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and physical violence. Cultural norms exacerbated these risks, with many survivors facing societal stigma and lacking knowledge about available support systems. Privacy was a major concern, with no safe spaces provided in relief camps or roadside shelters.

Child Marriages:

Given that factors like disasters triggered by floods increase income insecurity, families resort to child marriage to compensate and to achieve what they perceive as increased security for their daughters. Early child marriages (ages 14-17) had become increasingly common due to extreme poverty and lack of financial support that is raise due to continue disasters 2010, 2013, 2022 and 2024, Families struggling to meet basic survival needs often saw early marriage as a coping mechanism. In some cases, families accepted financial support or dowry to secure food and other essentials, further perpetuating this practice.

Limited Access to Healthcare and WASH Services

Healthcare Access:

Women, particularly pregnant ones, struggled to access healthcare facilities. Displacement camps lacked essential maternal care services, such as skilled birth attendants and medical supplies, increasing maternal and neonatal mortality risks. Malnutrition among mothers led to complications in newborns, with long-term health implications. The floods also destroyed numerous healthcare facilities, thus hindering women and girls from accessing reproductive health services, such as contraception and maternity health resources. In this context, it is

important to note that internal displacement camps often remain unsafe for displaced - and primarily younger - women to give birth as they routinely lack necessary equipment and personnel to provide proper maternal care.

WASH Facilities:

The camps lacked basic WASH facilities. Women described the absence of latrines, forcing them to use open spaces, compromising their dignity and hygiene. This situation led to the spread of waterborne diseases and other cause of diseases etc.

Impact on Children and Domestic Violence

Child Well-being:

The unmet needs of children often led to severe stress within households. Parents, overwhelmed by financial and emotional stress, sometimes resorted to physical punishment when children cried. This cycle of stress and frustration further deteriorated family dynamics.

Domestic Violence:

Financial instability and lack of basic necessities intensified domestic violence. Women reported increased incidents of abuse as families struggled to cope with the psychological and economic strain.

Inadequate Shelter and Privacy

Shelter Issues:

The affected families lived under makeshift arrangements with little to no privacy. Women felt particularly vulnerable, as inadequate shelters exposed them to risks of harassment and theft of home assets. In flood 2022, number of families shifted into government schools building, but later on they evacuated on the notice of district government.



Challenges for Persons with Disabilities and Elderly

Access Barriers:

Persons with disabilities and the elderly faced significant challenges in accessing aid, healthcare, and sanitation facilities. Relief efforts often overlooked their specific needs, such as mobility aids and accessible toilets, further marginalizing these groups.

Livelihood Disruption

The floods devastated agricultural lands and home-based businesses, which were primary sources of income for many women. This loss disproportionately affected women, particularly those who relied on informal work, pushing families deeper into poverty.

Underrepresentation in Decision-Making

Women and marginalized groups were underrepresented in community-level decision-making processes. This exclusion stemmed from a lack of awareness and knowledge about their rights and available platforms to raise their voices.

Inadequate Sanitation and Compromised Dignity

Women and girls struggled to maintain personal hygiene due to the lack of gender-segregated and safe sanitation facilities. This situation negatively impacted their physical health and mental well-being, particularly during menstruation.

Psychological Toll and Mental Health Challenges

The psychological impact of the floods was profound, especially for women and children. Displacement, loss of livelihoods, and constant fear of violence contributed to anxiety, depression, and trauma.

Increased Household Burdens

Women and girls are often responsible for multiple tasks such as collecting water, supporting household income, and participating in agricultural work. These responsibilities add significant physical and emotional strain, leaving them even more vulnerable during disaster recovery.

Impact on Education

Disasters like floods disrupt the education of girls more severely than boys, particularly in regions where access to education was already limited. Girls are often forced to leave school to help at home, which perpetuates cycles of gender inequality and limits their future opportunities. Education has also been compromised as a direct result of the Pakistan flood crisis. An estimated 26,222 schools were damaged, destroyed, or repurposed as shelters, thereby interrupting the schooling of around 3.5 million children around the country. Displaced girls in particular are impacted by these educational interruptions, given pre-existing inequalities surrounding their access to education and heightening the chances that their education is cut short.

Needs Analysis

The flood disaster has exposed several critical gaps in how disaster response efforts are structured, especially in relation to gender and the specific needs of displaced women and girls. The following key needs have been identified:

Safe Spaces for Women and Girls in Camps:

Overcrowded and unsafe conditions in camps have increased the risk of GBV. There is a pressing need to create safe spaces for women and girls that offer privacy and dignity. These spaces should be well-lit, secure and designed to reduce the risk of exploitation and violence. This recommendation aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which calls for promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all including vulnerable groups like women and girls.

Access to Reproductive Health Services, Sanitation and Menstrual Hygiene:

The destruction of healthcare facilities has hindered access to essential reproductive health services. In camps, women and girls are struggling with sanitation and menstrual hygiene, which further exacerbates health risks. There is an urgent need to restore healthcare services and provide essential hygiene products and facilities.

Gender - Specific Mental Health Care and Trauma Support:

Women and girls displaced by the floods are suffering from significant mental health issues due to the trauma of losing their homes and livelihoods. Specialized, gender-sensitive mental health support is essential to help them cope with the emotional and psychological toll of the disaster. SDG 3 also addresses mental health, highlighting the importance of providing accessible mental health services to populations in need.

Inclusive Education Strategies:

The destruction of schools and the displacement of families have disrupted the education of millions of children, especially girls. To ensure that girls do not fall further behind, there is a need for innovative education solutions, such as hybrid learning, mobile classrooms, and e-learning platforms that can continue even in displacement settings.

Designing Future Response Efforts

To address the needs identified above, future response efforts should integrate gender-responsive frameworks and consider the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls. The following recommendations are based on lessons learned from the flood disaster:

Establish Safe Spaces in Camps and Shelters:

Displacement camps should include separate, secure spaces for women and girls. These spaces should be equipped with gender-sensitive services, such as safe sleeping areas, private bathrooms and counseling services. Ensuring safety and dignity in these spaces is a critical priority.

Improve Access to Reproductive Health Services and Hygiene Products:

It is essential to prioritize the restoration of healthcare services for women and girls, especially those related to reproductive health. Mobile health clinics should be set up, menstrual hygiene products should be distributed, and maternal care services should be provided.

Provide Gender - Specific Mental Health Support:

Gender-sensitive mental health services are critical for displaced women and girls. These services should include trauma-informed care, support groups and one-on-one counseling. Mental health professionals need to be trained to understand and respond to the unique challenges women and girls face during and after a disaster.

Implement Inclusive Education Strategies:

To prevent further disruption to the education of girls, hybrid learning solutions that combine in-person and digital education should be adopted. Mobile schools, e-learning platforms, and the provision of school materials for displaced children can help minimize educational gaps, ensuring that girls can continue their education even during displacement.

Conclusion

The report emphasizes the need for disaster responses to incorporate gender-sensitive frameworks, especially for vulnerable populations like women, girls, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). As the devastating floods highlighted, these groups face unique challenges including heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV), disrupted education, and lack of access to healthcare and sanitation. Women and girls were disproportionately affected, with increased household responsibilities, reproductive health risks, and mental health challenges. In target areas, 26,222 schools were damaged, disrupting the education of 3.5 million children nationwide. This crisis further marginalized displaced girls who already faced systemic barriers to education.

Key findings reveal that families often resort to early child marriages as a coping mechanism against financial insecurity and GBV risks. Limited access to healthcare and inadequate sanitation in camps amplified risks to health and dignity, while inadequate mental health support exacerbated trauma. The loss of livelihoods and underrepresentation in decision-making processes further entrenched inequalities.

The report recommends creating safe spaces in displacement camps, restoring healthcare services, providing gender-sensitive mental health care, and implementing inclusive education strategies. These interventions align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, and 16, emphasizing health, education, and justice for vulnerable groups. This document underscores the importance of addressing gender disparities in disaster responses to build resilience, ensure inclusivity, and foster sustainable recovery for all affected populations.