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14. ABSTRACT To advance the U.S. women, peace and security strategy that aims to empower women and build stability around the world, the U.S. should reevaluate its crisis communication style during humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. This paper reviews lessons learned with a gendered analysis from interpersonal crisis communication and humanitarian efforts in Sri Lanka, and the use of mass media messages and visuals from floods in Nigeria and the 2023 Turkey/Syria earthquake and ends with recommendations for a different style of communication. Changing communication styles has the potential to reach more women and resonate better with them as a target audience so they may be less disproportionately affected by conflict and disaster. Further, it could give them agency, usher resilience, and open possibilities for changes in gender norms during phases of transition, thus bolstering the U.S. strategy and helping to improve security and stability around the globe.					
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**Lesson Learned on Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief:
A Gendered Analysis of U.S. Crisis Communication**



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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has a varied history of providing foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) around the world responding to an average of 75 crises annually in more than 70 countries¹. From donating simple funds for local aid, to airlifting emergency equipment, to fully establishing medical facilities and opening airport operations and runways. The U.S. has been an involved actor since the establishment of USAID in 1961 as the lead agency for the U.S. government (USG) focused on international development and humanitarian efforts worldwide, often with the U.S. military providing unique capabilities to bolster global reach, accessibility, knowledge and operational experience.

In 2017 the USG codified efforts on women, peace, and security (WPS) releasing the first-ever whole-of-government strategy followed by USAID's implementation plan in 2019, all aimed at advancing women's meaningful participation in preventing and resolving conflict, countering violent extremism and terrorism, and building post-conflict peace and stability². Thereby recognizing critical links between women's empowerment and global peace and security³. Under the strategy the U.S. is working to advance three, mutually reinforcing objectives through lines of efforts:

- Seek and support the preparation and meaningful participation of women around the world in decision-making processes related to conflict and crises

¹ USAID. "USAID Humanitarian Assistance." Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance>.

² USAID. "USAID Women Peace and Security Implementation Plan." Accessed March 21, 2023, p 2. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-02/2020-USAID-Women-Peace-and-Security-Implementation-Plan.pdf>.

³ Ibid, 2.

- Promote the protection of women and girls' human rights; access to humanitarian assistance; and safety from violence, abuse, and exploitation around the world
- Adjust U.S. international programs to improve outcomes in equality for, and the empowerment of women.

While the USG continues to expand the connections between HA/DR and WPS, another critical connection to also explore is how communication can be a tool to empower women during HA/DR efforts to meet the objectives outlined above. This paper will analyze how gender is communicated through HA/DR efforts and offer recommendations to better meet the USG's WPS implementation plan. Specifically, it will assess lessons learned from other countries to inform how the USG could adjust its communication style to apply a genderlect theory, which could provide agency and resilience to survivors and bolster the USG's WPS strategy, helping to break cycles of instability, crises and conflict.

GENDERLECT THEORY AND BUILDING TRUST DURING CRISIS

To begin, it is important to define foundational terms. First, a gendered analysis is application of the genderlect theory from the public relations field that outlines differences between female and male communication styles of senders, and receivers' stereotypes of the sender⁴. More specifically, a female style of communication stems from an innate penchant for bonding and creating relationships, therefore it is symmetrical and meant to build rapport and connections, whereas a male style of communication is triggered by an innate desire to gain

⁴ Roxana D. Maiorescu, 2016. "Crisis Management at General Motors and Toyota: An Analysis of Gender-Specific Communication and Media Coverage." *Public Relations Review* 42 (4): p. 557. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.03.011>.

respect and status, which makes it asymmetrical, monologic and aimed at delivering information, commanding attention and winning arguments⁵.

Further, female communication was found to be tactful, gentle and sensitive; while male communication was thought to be more blunt, dominant and forceful⁶. Additionally, research describes female communication as ‘weak talk’, enabling women to relate to others by showing excessive concern for the interlocutor and putting the latter’s needs first. Conversely, men’s communication is void of such elements and aimed at achieving a goal. Most importantly, studies on crisis management recommend both men and women be trained in the two gender dialects or styles of communication: men should understand and apply the sensitivity extant in the female communication, while women should get a sense of the assertiveness that characterizes men talk⁷. And while there is not one best style of communication, the style of communication could be extended to crisis communication, which is vital during HA/DR efforts.

Crisis communication models generally do not connect to genderlect theory. Instead, much crisis communication research focuses on reducing uncertainty⁸, however, an intersection with genderlect theory is the importance of building trust. Scholars suggest “the immediate communication needs during a crisis are to reduce uncertainty, allowing audiences to create an understanding of what happened so that they may respond appropriately.”⁹ Moreover, uncertainty is related to lack of trust. Where trust depends on the sources and means of communication, and the more the public puts trust in the organization, the better they are able to

⁵ Ibid, 561.

⁶ Ibid, 557.

⁷ Ibid, 557.

⁸ Anna Fokaefs and Sapountzaki Kalliopi. 2021. “Crisis Communication after Earthquakes in Greece and Japan: Effects on Seismic Disaster Management.” *Sustainability* 13 (16): p 5. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169257>.

⁹ Ibid, 6

handle fear and panic in crisis contexts¹⁰. Consequently, the content and sources of emergency information and channels of communication between scientific institutions, governmental and non-governmental managers and the public affect the levels of uncertainty and trust in the crisis context. Finally, scholars who explored crisis communication models of uncertainty reduction found that messages of cooperation/unification from several trustworthy organizations and viewpoints alleviate uncertainty in periods of emergency and crisis¹¹.

It is important to note that crisis communication is multi-faceted and involves face-to-face interpersonal communication with thousands of first and emergency responders. It also includes public-facing communication and information sharing and seeking with organizational representatives through mainstream mass media and social media. In all shapes and forms of communication, modulating the gender dialect of both males and female styles of communication during an HA/DR crisis could be helpful to advancing the WPS strategy.

Connecting genderlect theory with crisis communication suggests female communication styles could be more effective in crisis communication settings for the USG HA/DR activities. A female-communication style focused on relationship building, cooperation, and symmetrical communication aimed at building rapport could be more beneficial to building trust and reducing uncertainty during and after crises. This could further provide agency and resilience to affected nations and survivors, while also opening possibilities to reframe narratives and stereotypes through mass media, and in the longer-term advance the USG's WPS goal of empowering women.

GENDERLECT THEORY IN INTERPERSONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION:

¹⁰ Ibid, 6

¹¹ Ibid, 26

LESSONS FROM SRI LANKA CONFLICT

Looking at early lessons learned on HA/DR in Sri Lanka in 2003 after decades of civil war and displacement, one study found women and other minority groups to be disadvantaged or even harmed from humanitarian assistance. Displaced women from the north and east of the country were less likely to speak up, compared to their male counterparts, during need assessment phases that involved extensive interpersonal communication and information seeking by non-governmental organizations charged with aid distribution¹². This led to an unequal distribution of services, sometimes exacerbating the disproportionate suffering of the population during crises¹³.

In response, non-governmental organizations appointed women as gender coordinators, which produced several unfortunate consequences. First, most female gender coordinators ended up working exclusively with women's groups and/or women's projects thus rarely interacting with male beneficiaries or being provided with opportunities to make men rethink and change unequal gender hierarchies they might be perpetuating¹⁴. Appointing only women as gender coordinators absolved field and other program officers for promoting gender equality in programs¹⁵, stove piping gender as a separate issue rather than integrated throughout various issues in a community. Finally, the labeling of gender was seen as a 'soft' issue, one that did not warrant the apportioning of significant resources if they did not produce hard results based on monitoring and evaluation outcomes¹⁶. Thus, a single female gender advisor or a team of females

¹² Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis. "Beyond Gender : Towards a Feminist Analysis of Humanitarianism and Development in Sri Lanka," *Women's Studies Quarterly* , Fall - Winter, 2003, Vol. 31, No. 3/4, Women and Development: Rethinking Policy and Reconceptualizing Practice, p 217.

¹³ Ibid, 218.

¹⁴ Ibid, 219.

¹⁵ Ibid, 219.

¹⁶ Ibid, 219.

focused on only women's issues post crisis were not as effective as hoped, but a change in communication style may be more helpful.

Applying a female-communication style that incorporated sensitivity, tact and symmetry, regardless of gender of the humanitarian actor, could have enabled more trust-building and more accurate information sharing thus a fairer distribution of aid. Further, the application of symmetric interpersonal communication by males in crisis scenarios could also facilitate a better understanding of gender hierarchies that may exist in a community, which could allow for a male humanitarian to more forcefully advocate for broader gender equality programs that produce 'harder'/measurable results while also empowering women to share critical information that could be used to rebuild communities and improve conditions.

What was compelling from Sri Lanka lessons learned is that the impact of conflict and crises could be enabling, since populations were seeking information to reduce uncertainty, people were more open to receiving information and receptive to new ideas that could redefine traditional gender roles in society¹⁷. For instance, some NGOs in Sri Lanka trained young women in unconventional trades and skillsets like being mechanics, allowing gender norms to change during periods of transition¹⁸. And a female-communication style that builds trust during a crisis and HA/DR efforts can further usher agency and resilience to communities and survivors, which could reshape traditional gender roles in an affected community.

Some critics may argue that enabling the transition of gender norms during crisis could be counterproductive, especially in authoritarian, patriarchal societies resistant to change. For instance, the UN and the U.S. have devoted years and immense resources to advancing women's

¹⁷ Ibid, 218.

¹⁸ Ibid, 217.

rights in Afghanistan with little progress to be shown over the last several years¹⁹. While this argument has merit, it fails to also account for the fact that women in Afghanistan and in other countries facing violent extremism have also seen a rise in female suicide bombers and their overall involvement in terrorist plots across Europe²⁰, which similarly goes against traditional gender norms of women as peaceful. So, if gender norms in authoritarian patriarchal societies like Afghanistan can accept women as suicide bombers, why then, can they not accept a female mechanic, a lead negotiator or a decision maker? Even more reason it is critical for humanitarian actors to symmetrically communicate and accurately understand gender structures throughout needs assessments and phases of disaster relief, thereby building trust and providing the most effective aid to assist in recovery efforts that can empower and catalyze agency to create changes aligned with the WPS objectives.

GENDER IN MASS MEDIA:

FLOODS IN NIGERIA AND EARTHQUAKE IN TURKEY-SYRIA BORDER

Crisis and HA/DR responses are highly publicized world events covered by international news agencies and social media, and these times of higher media coverage and information-seeking provide opportunities to analyze gender through narratives and images promulgated through media. Gender is often overlooked by media during initial HA/DR responses, but research has shown media plays a role in shaping public opinion and are an important disseminator of the realities that disasters and conflict can inflict, and the treatment and portrayal of gender are vital to information sharing, seeking and mobilization²¹.

¹⁹ Ibid, 227.

²⁰ Pip Henty and Beth Eggleston. "Mothers, Mercenaries and Mediators: Women Providing Answers to the Questions We Forgot to Ask." *Security Challenges* 14, no. 2 (2018). p 112.

²¹ Okudolo, Ikemefun, Itumeleng Mekoa, and Mutiu Ganiyu. "Media, Gender Protection and Disaster Reduction in the Lagos Mega City: Content Analysis of News Agency of Nigeria Reportage of Flood." *Gender & Behavior* 17, no. 3 (2019),13489.

Research conducted in Nigeria observed initial media reports of potential floods were ineffective in gendered content and warnings of the devastations, which disproportionately impacted women²². Media reports and messages were devoid of emotional feeling and the reality of victims, and instead focused on mere numbers of potential flood damage and amount of displaced people, with minimal attention to the female gender²³. Further, media coverage did not include culturally-specific gendered actions males and females could take to mobilize and prepare for the flood – i.e., men clearing drainage channels. These findings similarly support genderlect theory, where the male form of communication focused on blunt, information dissemination of property values and hard numbers, which did not resonate well amongst the diverse population.

Further research on gender in conflict found that amongst various cultures, war and peace are gendered through narratives and visuals at a symbolic level, where war is associated with action, courage, weapons, protections, independence, heroism, discipline, challenge are all terms coded as masculine²⁴ And peace in contrast is associated with passivity, domesticity, compromise, interdependence, compromise and negotiation are coded as feminine in most cultures, and that masculine is valued more highly than feminine²⁵. Specifically of interest, is the connection between research findings amongst narratives that portray women as vulnerable, especially during conflict. Such findings resonate across cultures and centuries, where heroic men fight to protect vulnerable women, children and nations²⁶. Further, gender scholars have noted that various humanitarian conflicts from the 1990s promulgated the narrative in which NATO

²² Ibid, 13496.

²³ Ibid, 13496.

²⁴ Cohn, Carol, ed. *Women and Wars*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 13.

²⁶ Ibid, p 28.

reinvented themselves as masculine, heroic and the U.S. as liberators and protectors, while impacted civilians were portrayed as weak and passive²⁷. This also extended to the image of the military, technology and equipment, which were all similarly associated with masculinity. The connection of symbolic gendered narratives and stereotypes during conflict, along with genderlect theory, are visible in recent U.S. HA/DR efforts.

A gender analysis of recent U.S. HA/DR efforts to the earthquake response in Turkey and Syria in February 2023 demonstrate the narratives and stereotypes outlined by previous gender research. A look at a sample of the most quoted news releases and images released by U.S. government applied a masculine form of communication that was aimed at a goal, asymmetric, blunt and forceful, and prominently featured military equipment. For instance, USAID released fourteen standardized fact sheets with data-heavy infographics that directly stated the delivered quantities and the monetary value of aid, missing opportunities to connect through emotion and show symmetry in what the communities needed and valued, not what was provided. Official statements by U.S. President Joe Biden were aimed at a goal immediate response where he said,

“At my direction, senior American officials reached out immediately to Turkish counterparts to coordinate any and all needed assistance. Our teams are deploying quickly to begin to support Turkish search and rescue efforts and address the needs of those injured and displaced by the earthquake.”²⁸

Taking a slightly different approach, female USAID administrator Samantha Powers,

²⁷ Wilcox, Lauren. “Gendering the Cult of the Offensive.” *Security Studies* 18, no. 2 (June 12, 2009): 214–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410902900152>, 229.

²⁸ White House. “Statement by President Joe Biden.” Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/06/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-earthquakes-impacting-turkiye-and-syria/>.

added emotion and symmetry underscoring the victims first, their needs and the destruction of the earthquake. She said,

“I am devastated by the news of the earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria this morning... My thoughts are with the victims and their families, many of whom were already grappling with brutal losses from the war in Syria, including refugees and their host communities. The United States is committed to assisting in the recovery in any way we can.”²⁹

Moreover, the visualization of U.S. assistance was minimal, and images available echoed stereotypes associated with gender symbolic to conflict mentioned previously. The initial release from USAID featured a photo of a man next to a U.S. Air Force aircraft with equipment being loaded (Figure 1), visualizing heroism, masculinity, protection and immediate action of the US.



Figure 1 – USAID Released Photo³⁰

²⁹ USAID. “Statement by Administrator Samantha Powers.” Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/feb-06-2023-statement-by-administrator-samantha-power-usaid-deploys-disaster-assistance-response-team-devastating-earthquake-turkiye-generates-significant-humanitarian-need>.

³⁰ Ibid

Additionally, most photos and visuals centrally feature men (Figure 2 and 3), where there is little attention on the type of aid or the needs of the victims and survivors. While these initial hours of response have limited opportunities for documentation and perspectives of victims on the ground, there may have been missed opportunities to highlight female first responders or specific supplies that represent the needs of females therefore demonstrating the awareness of differing gender needs of the effected populations. For instance, there could be photos of baby formula or shelter kits, which tell a more comprehensive story compared to wrapped crates featured below.



Figure 2 – Department of Defense Released Photo³¹

³¹ Department of Defense. “US Aids Turkey After Devastating Earthquake,” February 8, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3293241/us-aids-turkey-after-devastating-qaakes/>.



Figure 3 – Department of Defense Released Photo³²

Critics might argue that gender-specific communication during HA/DR through mass media is too difficult to manage and change due to the disproportionate number of males who dominate fields like first responders, emergency managers, medical providers and firefighters. Additionally, humanitarian communicators find it difficult to balance compelling messages and appropriate visual imagery that respects privacy and portrays victims in dignified ways, but still include a compelling visual hook to capture world audiences³³. While this may hold some truth, it fails to apply creativity and discounts that fact that male responders can adjust to a female-communication style through visual and verbal messages. Instead of focusing communication on large efforts of a response -- i.e., massive amounts of supplies and equipment airlifted and the large groups of emergency responders -- organizations can instead personalize the story on one or a select few emergency responders who have gathered, met and experienced the needs of diverse people. This could apply character-centered communication strategies with striking visuals that better connect with audiences, while also highlighting stories of agency and

³² Ibid.

³³ Dhanesh, Ganga S., and Nadia Rahman. "Visual Communication and Public Relations: Visual Frame Building Strategies in War and Conflict Stories." *Public Relations Review* 47, no. 1 (March 2021): 102003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102003>, p 5.

resilience of survivors and underscoring the triumph of the human spirit in challenging and perilous situations³⁴. Centering on human-focused experiences in the mass media during HA/DR crisis communication might also personalize HA/DR responders, build trust needed for their interpersonal communication and in the long run, empower women and other survivors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US HA/DR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

As HA/DR operations are expected to rise with concerns of climate change, conflict, displacement and overall changes to human security³⁵, there is an opportunity for the U.S. to re-evaluate how it communicates gender with its responses, applying the lessons learned from the research and examples discussed above. First, the U.S. must recognize and apply crisis communication techniques to HA/DR efforts that focus on both interpersonal communication of its first responders, while also providing more deliberate narratives and visuals in the mass media. With the first responders and those responsible for assessing needs of women during initial responses, it is imperative that men and women apply a female-style of symmetric interpersonal communication that focuses on the victims, builds trust, and is tactful and sensitive to the needs of varying people. Further, first responders, who tend to be disproportionately men, should not solely rely on a gender female advisor to assess women's needs. Instead, male first responders should also be versed and trained in adjusting their interpersonal communication style to be apply more empathetic listening and trust building, that does not appear solely focused on or aimed at a goal or immediate action. Further, U.S. male interpersonal communicators should be cognizant of the stereotypes they might convey so they can disrupt the idea that they are heroic, liberators and protectors there to achieve a goal. And humanitarian actors should seek

³⁴ Ibid, 10.

³⁵ Kaldor, Mary. "Human Security in Complex Operations," no. 2 (2023), 3.

ways to highlight positive changes to break the perception that victims and especially females are vulnerable, weak and helpless. This could transfer agency and empower those affected to move from victims to survivors, who have control in the crisis and can access resources available to mobilize.

For HA/DR crisis communication in the mass media, narratives, statements and visuals of U.S. efforts should also emphasize a female-communication style that displays empathy and encourages trust building, featuring females while also addressing specific gendered needs. Again, official statements in news releases that are amplified by international news agencies, should communicate symmetry, sensitivity and emotion, setting a tone of relationship building, while also demonstrating the ability to understand the differing needs of victims and impacted communities. Photos, visuals and overarching narratives could focus on people, not the hard data of monetary value, weight of supplies or type of equipment used to deliver aid. In addition, communicating through mass media should address differing gender needs – whether promoting the availability of needed supplies like shelter or baby food, or direct actions specific to genders in cultures like purifying water to drink. Last, messages and visuals of female victims should convey strength and resilience, and not the stereotyped vulnerability and weakness, which could again empower women, provide agency and usher the reshaping of gender roles in a society receptive to transitions.

CONCLUSION

A foundational portion of the U.S. women, peace and security strategy and USAID's implementation plan is focused on empowering women around the world. To reach women more effectively, there should be a united effort by the U.S. government to adjust how it communicates during HA/DR efforts, especially when crises scenarios are ripe for information

sharing and seeking to reduce uncertainty. Many have heard the quote, “You can’t be what you can’t see”³⁶, and this rings true for how the U.S. communicates both visually and narratively through HA/DR efforts to women in countries undergoing conflict and disaster. By using both a female interpersonal communication style that enables trust building and empowers agency, along with mass media to promulgate symmetry, emotion, relationship-building and strength, the U.S. could open communities to opportunities during crises, which could help improve the stability and security of countries worldwide.

³⁶ Clair Topalian. “You Can’t Be What You Can’t See: Carving Paths for Female Entrepreneurs,” July 28, 2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/you-cant-be-what-you-cant-see-carving-paths-for-female-entrepreneurs_b_5386321.

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