

EU Aid Volunteers

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Women's leadership in humanitarian crises and conflicts: a collection of case studies

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Introduction

When humanitarian crises and conflicts hit communities, women often experience the most significant negative effects at the same time as having the weakest voice in decision-making about responses¹. Recognising this need, ActionAid's GESHAVO project, funded by the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, worked with ActionAid Hellas, ActionAid International Kenya, ActionAid Zambia and ActionAid Zimbabwe to build their capacity to work with, involve, and support women in protracted crises.

This project sought to share learning and insight of what works in terms of women's leadership, involvement, and empowerment as widely as possible. This publication presents a collection of case studies, drawn from within the ActionAid Federation, to highlight inspirational practices and good practice examples. Examples are provided that relate directly to humanitarian crises as well as those that illustrate how women can take a lead role in helping themselves and their communities become more resilient to future crises and be better able to respond when they hit.

Case studies are presented in an overview format designed to introduce them, and links to further information are therefore provided.

The [EU Aid Volunteers Initiative \(EUAVI\)](#) is a long-term volunteering initiative for citizens and residents of EU countries to volunteer overseas to support humanitarian work. The programme provides practical support to humanitarian aid projects and contributes to strengthening the local capacity and resilience of disaster-affected communities. It was launched in 2015 and has since sent nearly 400 volunteers to countries throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America for periods between one and 18 months. Volunteers are hosted by a local organisation in country during their placement.

ActionAid Denmark received funding from the EUAVI to run the GESHAVO project ('Gender Sensitive Humanitarian Aid Volunteering'). The project seeks to build the strength of women volunteers who are prone to humanitarian disasters and conflicts. It worked with ActionAid federation members in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya to support them to become certified to host volunteers as part of the EU Aid Volunteers programme, and for ActionAid Denmark to become registered as a sending organisation.

¹ For an explanation of why ActionAid promotes women's leadership in emergencies, [click here](#).

KOMESI women group: power in numbers

ActionAid Kenya

When implementing the Gender Sensitive and Humanitarian Volunteering (GESHAVO) project, Action Aid Kenya conducted a consultancy on Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) on disasters in Pokot County in Kenya. One of the most involved group during the research is the KOMESI women network which mainly addresses FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) in the area. KOMESI has been a partner of Action Aid Kenya (AAIK) and the members have been part of capacity building sessions conducted by AAIK on women rights, humanitarian response and resilience. The network has been in full support of EWEA work in Pokot county. They take their time to create awareness in on early warning signs on drought all over the county. KOMESI sensitizes the community through schools; barazas and churches. They have 25 officials representing different parts of the county who meet every month. In the Pokot community, men are the ones mostly involved in the prediction and addressing disasters, however, members of KOMESI have recently been involved in the work. Women in Pokot County have found their voice in coming together and carved out their space in addressing the disasters affecting their community. Being in a group has made it easier for them to reach more people and work with several local and national committees and ministries.



Photo credit: ActionAid

Changing and diversifying livelihoods

ActionAid USA

During the East Africa food crisis in 2010, Action Aid Kenya in partnership with World Food Program (WFP) started the Food for Asset program in Isiolo County. Lujah, who has been working with Action Aid, coordinated six food distributions in the Ol-donyiro region. She oversaw the Food for Assets program, where women worked for up to 12 days a month on a community project, such as water conservation, and received food to support their families. Under the program, community members were taught dryland rainwater harvesting techniques. From this program, the women came up with a water project which has helped them do irrigation and be able to feed their families even when rains fail. Currently they have been able to convince even their male counterparts to support irrigation as an alternative livelihood which is a great impact in a community that solely depends on livestock keeping for income. In the recent years the community has been able to survive droughts. Even though, there is still need for relief support during the drought season, it is not as bad as it was 10 years ago.

[Click here for more information.](#)



Photo credit: Alice Oldenburg/ActionAid

Susan and the seeds of hope

ActionAid Kenya

ActionAid Kenya met Susan in 2012 when she joined a women's group in Isiolo and was trained on agroecological practices, and supported with an initial seed supply of onion and tomato seeds, cassava cuttings and sweet potato vines. Years on, Susan diligently spends her mornings braving the morning heat to attend to her farm before the heat becomes unbearable. Despite the current drought being experienced, Susan is food secure and has dedicated half of an acre to irrigated agriculture where she intercroops maize with beans, kales, spinach, sweet potatoes, cassava and some fruit trees like pawpaws, bananas and mangoes. It is through working with women like Susan Apur; a mother of four, who used to depend on relief food, casual labour and charcoal burning to feed her family, that we support women in taking the centre stage to ensure their families are resilient to the effect of climate change and are food secure.



Photo credit: ActionAid

[Click here for more information.](#)

Demanding accountability

ActionAid Kenya



Photo credit: ActionAid

When Kilifi County in Kenya was hit by drought, Bernadetta Kavoo who is a member of the Disaster Management Committee mobilised other women to go and demand for accountability from the county Government. Bernadetta had been part of women who were trained by ActionAid Kenya on social accountability. She was quoted saying:

“When we started working with ActionAid a few years ago, women began to unite and started to look at how to stop these injustices and gender inequalities in our community. Before, we did not know much. We did not know that the government was actually responsible for availing services like water for the communities and education for our children. Now, through the training we received from ActionAid on various ways of getting services from government and other organizations, life is changing.”

When Bernadetta mobilized the women, they camped at the Governor’s office for three days after which the Governor listened to their demands and relief food was supplied to the community.

[Click here for more information.](#)

Addressing the unequal workload carried by women in the household

ActionAid Rwanda



Photo credit: Maria Kaitesi/ActionAid

Mukahigiro Francise is a farmer in Gitita. One year, when she was short of money, she sold a piece of the land she owned, in order to pay for her children's school fees. But she immediately regretted the decision. She said it made her feel "poor". Today, however, she is happy to report that all her children are enrolled in school and proud that she is the one paying for their school fees. One of her sons has graduated. That was, she says, the proudest day of her life. What changed things for Mukahigiro was her involvement in ActionAid's Promoting Opportunities for Women's Empowerment and Rights (POWER).

When she joined, the POWER project provided training on techniques for Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA) and a group saving scheme. Mukahigiro's husband joined a workshop for couples and 'time-diary' training. Before this, Mukahigiro and her husband had mixed different crops together (the 'traditional way'); as a result they were only able to feed their family. Since the workshops, they now separate crops on their plot cultivating one seed type at one location, according to the soil type. Mukahigiro preserves seeds (as there is no seed bank nearby) – and gained insights from a visit to a nearby province's seed preservation system. Among other benefits, she was provided a water pump, which saves time: *"Now I can collect grass for the cow, join the group meetings and government meetings."* She and her husband share household responsibilities. If she is late returning home, her husband does the washing, takes care of the children, or cooks the dinner. Women in her area have come to understand their property rights, Mukahigiro feels. If a husband wants to sell the family's land, he must discuss it with his wife and both must agree. Overall, she can a greater role in decision making.

[Click here for more information](#) and [watch a short video here](#). This example is drawn from a case study originally written by James Butare and Anatole Uwiragiye of ActionAid and edited by Annie Holmes.

Zambezi Valley Resilience Building Programme

ActionAid Zimbabwe



Photo credit: ActionAid

A successful approach to social inclusion should be based on a thorough understanding of the varying needs of women and the youth to create tailored programs that meet their specific needs. Gender and age play a role in influencing who in a community has access to and control over assets and information. The Crop and Livestock Improvement Centre (CLIC) in Mandimoni in Binga is a clear reflection of how social inclusion is a critical component of the Zimbabwe Resilience Building (ZRBF's) project objectives. The CLIC includes a pen fattening project that has benefitted the youth and a vegetable garden which helps women to develop proficiency in vegetable cultivation. Nomakhosi Gondwe (18 years) and Senzeni Nyathi (35 years) who benefited from the pen fattening project said it opened an avenue to empower youths who are usually excluded from development programs.

Youth are likely to face marginalisation due to their membership in excluded demographic groups, including: women, people with disability and economically impoverished. On the other hand two representatives of Sizimisele Women's Vegetable group, Nokuthula Nkomo and Rosemary Mamvura (44 years) said the vegetable gardens assist families with regular consumption of vegetables. The beneficiaries can sell their surplus and earn money which can be spent to purchase other nutritional foods for the family members. Vegetable gardens also help women to establish their dignity in the society as well. Rosemary added that in 2019 she sold some of the produce from the vegetable garden to gain income for her child's school fees.

[Click here for more information.](#)

Women leading in humanitarian responses

ActionAid Zimbabwe



Photo credit: Takaitei Bote/ActionAid

Emma Mutambiranwa leads the Rural Women Assembly (RWA) with over 500 members and is the chair of the Food Distribution Programme (FDP) in Nyazura, Zimbabwe. The RWA movement is a women's empowerment group supported by ActionAid Zimbabwe, whose members are supporting the current emergency response. The Lean Season Assistance Programme (LSA), for example, is promoting resilience building among community members facing food shortages in the face of droughts and the harsh economic conditions in Zimbabwe. As the FDP chair, she ensures that women, vulnerable groups like people with disabilities, the elderly and child-headed families are prioritised and supported during distribution. Although the RWA movement is doing a lot to promote resilience, Zimbabwe is experiencing its worst hunger crisis in more than a decade, with 3.6 million people suffering from severe food shortages. This shows there is still need for more support to create sustainable solutions in drought prone areas.

[Click here for more information.](#)

Rural Women Assembly

ActionAid Zambia

Rural Women Assembly is a self-organised network or alliance of national rural women's movements, assemblies, grassroots organisations and chapters of mixed peasant unions, federations and movements across eight countries in the SADC region, and the Zambia Chapter of Rural Women Assembly is a partner of ActionAid Zambia. The women of Rural Women Assembly train community members on practices of agro-ecology (indigenous seeds), women's land rights and climate justice. The women work in Chongwe and Rufunsa district where they train and advocate on behalf of their communities and the country at large.

Tipenyenji Phiri is a member of the Rural Women Assembly. In her farming, she uses only indigenous seeds and organic manure in order to fight against climate change effects. In this year's rain season (2019-2020), the season was considered to be late since the rains began in early January instead of October. In order to ensure that her crop grew healthy, she planted early maturing seeds, locally known as 'Kapyra Bwangu' which directly translates to early maturing. To fertilize her crop, she used local manure locally known as tea manure (a cheap organic manure which is made up of brown sugar, yeast, animal manure and water). Tipenyenji uses this manure on all her crops and she encourages her fellow small holder farmers to use this method instead of non-organic fertiliser which can damage the soil in the long term.

Rural Women Assembly participate in national agricultural activities such as the Annual Agricultural Show to showcase their work and advocate.

Written by Sharon Mwamba, ActionAid Zambia.



Photo credit: ActionAid

Women’s Protection Action Groups

ActionAid Arab Region

The four-year programme entitled “Strengthened Rights and Resilience in Protracted Crises and Disasters” funded by DANIDA is helping to drive change through three integral focus areas in Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon: protection, which increases the safety and dignity of women; accountability to affected populations, which ensures duty bearers are held to account for the protection, promotion and fulfilment of their rights; and the increased social and economic resilience of women and young people in protracted crises, ensuring lasting change that is locally-driven.

In Jordan, Women’s Protection Action Groups (WPAGs) are helping increase levels of safety, resilience and active involvement in decision making for women in their local communities. WPAGs comprising of diverse women representing host and Syrian women are established, trained and mentored to be active participants in the programme; they are helping to shape and define the needs of women and girls in their own communities and those attending the women-led safe spaces, located in two locations in Jordan (Zarqa and Mafraq). The women were initially trained in participatory protection assessment tools which they applied with over two hundred women. These results were then used to shape activities within the safe spaces as well as design the syllabus for the WPAGs themselves which they are now, in turn, disseminating through awareness raising activities in their communities. Early marriage and gender-based violence (GBV), for example, were primary topics of interest. Others included wellbeing, such as psychosocial support, hygiene, nutrition and exercise, in addition to communication skills, especially within the family domain.

The women involved note that the protection action groups are a way to “*break the culture of shame*” which permeates their communities. They note, “*we have found ourselves as women...this is a safe space to voice our ideas.*” The unique model of the WLCBP approach has facilitated open dialogue between women within their communities, enabling lively debate and strengthening of cross-community relationships.



Photo credit: Tala Mashaqbeh/ActionAid

A Platform for Women to Take Action in Gaza

ActionAid Palestine

Sabir was married and living in Egypt when both her parents were killed in the 2014 Gaza–Israeli conflict. At the age of 24, she found herself responsible for her seven younger brothers and sisters. She needed to go home. Her husband refused to go with her and so they divorced and Sabir returned on her own to Rafah, in the south of the narrow Palestinian territory of Gaza, bounded by Israel and Egypt. With the economy decimated by the Israeli blockade, sanctions, and attacks, unemployment here is close to 50% and options for someone like Sabir are severely limited. In Rafah, however, she learned about a women-led organisation, the Wefaq Society for Women and Child Care, that provides psychosocial and legal support to women and girls. She was able to talk to a psychologist there.

In the ongoing emergency conditions of life in Gaza, organising from within communities provides the most effective foundation for a measure of protection. In neighbourhoods of the city of Rafah, women-led protection and response committees are identifying and addressing local priorities, such as electrification for vulnerable households, ‘safe stations’ for women at bus shelters, and hotlines for those experiencing gender-based violence. Supporting these committees and the women of the area in general are community-based organisations that provide legal and psychosocial services and business training and grants, combining to strengthen the voice, agency, and resilience of women and their communities.

Wefaq supports women in many different ways, providing referrals to legal and other services for those who experience gender-based violence; linking women – Sabir for example – to training and opportunities to secure their livelihoods; and helping to develop committees of women to drive community-based change. Some women who have received services from Wefaq – including Sabir – are selected for training and business grants from another ActionAid partner, the Ma’an Development Centre. Now 29 years old, Sabir is training to be a beautician and hairdresser and has her own salon. She attends classes in the morning and has clients in the afternoon.

In this context of conflict and occupation, ActionAid’s core approach is to strengthen women’s leadership, protection, and resilience, particularly through women-led community-based protection mechanisms. In Gaza, this takes the form of protection and response committees, like the one Rasha belongs to, that are creating space and opportunity for women to make decisions in their communities and are driving change and shifting traditional power dynamics. Partnering with groups such as Wefaq and the Ma’an Development Centre that support individual women and groups to build resilience and take on decision-making, ActionAid focuses on rights, resilience, and redistribution – gathering evidence from below, amplifying community voices, and supporting collective organising.

This example is drawn from a case study originally written by Claire Grant, Melissa Pearce, and Annie Holmes. The project has been funded by DANIDA.

Summary

The case studies above are just a snippet of the amazing work that women are doing in responses to humanitarian disasters and creating resilience in their communities and how prioritising their leadership can have multiple positive impacts for them and their communities. From these examples and case studies it is evident that solidarity and the strength in numbers has contributed enormously to changing their position in decision-making processes. From women demanding accountability in Kilifi County to the KOMESI women group in Kenya who have contributed to discussions of early warnings signs and early responses to disasters. Changing the traditional forms of livelihoods and adapting to more sustainable and resilient forms of livelihood is also evident from most of the examples presented in this report; while the women in Isiolo county in Kenya moved from pastoralism to agriculture, women like Mukahigiro in Rwanda are moving to more sustainable form of agriculture.

While we all work towards women empowerment and creating resilience in areas that are experiencing humanitarian disasters, it is of great importance to consider gender-specific needs as well as power dynamics within the communities. For example, women and children are the worst hit during disasters and unless we address needs specific to the two groups, we will still be a long way from creating any resilience. Gender, age and economic status, for example, determine who takes control of resources and information therefore making it a necessity to work with excluded demographic groups in creation of resilience.

Additional resources and further reading

[Leading the Way. Women-Led Localisation in Central Sulawesi: Towards Gender Transformative Action](#)

September 2019

In September 2018, a series of powerful earthquakes struck the Central Sulawesi province of Indonesia. ActionAid's Indonesian entity, YAPPIKA-ActionAid, was one of the first organisations to establish its presence in Palu on the ground. Working with a selection of partners, including women-led organisations, YAPPIKA-ActionAid worked to identify and meet immediate needs in affected communities, especially those of women and girls. Drawing on learnings from these efforts, and in partnership with local women and women-led organisations, this report presents a piece of research undertaken by ActionAid to understand the challenges and opportunities for women-led localisation.

['Making the Local Global' guidance note](#)

May 2019

This is a guidance note on supporting local women leaders' participation in global humanitarian spaces. This Guidance Note aims to encourage and support local women leaders' participation at global humanitarian and resilience platforms. It explores some of the barriers that local women leaders face when it comes to participating meaningfully in global humanitarian meetings and lists key practice points to promote their participation, along with recommendations for organisers of global events. It was informed by interviews conducted with local women leaders from Bangladesh, Haiti, Gaza, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Philippines, Syria, and Vanuatu - and also with international humanitarian organisations.

['Safety with Dignity' - Women-Led Community-Based Protection manual](#)

May 2019

Safety with Dignity is ActionAid's WLCBP (Women-Led Community-Based Protection) manual. It outlines the theory and core components of the WLCBP approach. It builds on ActionAid's feminist, human rights-based model seeking to build women's individual and collective power, transform systems and structures, and strengthen access to rights, services and resources.

[Why ActionAid promotes women's leadership in emergencies](#)

February 2019

This blog responds to the persistent question of why ActionAid focuses on women's leadership in emergencies and the positive difference that can be made by promoting and supporting women's leadership.

The European Union with its Member States is a leading global donor of humanitarian aid. The EU helps over 120 million victims of conflict and disasters every year. With headquarters in Brussels and a global network of field offices, the Union provides assistance to the most vulnerable people solely on the basis of humanitarian needs, without discrimination of race, ethnic group, religion, gender, age, nationality or political affiliation.

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