



# RETHINKING RESILIENCE:

Prioritizing Gender Integration to Enhance  
Household and Community Resilience to  
Food Insecurity in the Sahel



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sahel – an ecological transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the Sudan Savanna to the south – is a complex region facing large-scale humanitarian crises of increased frequency, severity, and interconnectedness. The plight of the millions who live in this region has drawn international attention. But while the response has addressed immediate needs, it has not increased the affected population's capacity to withstand future shocks and stresses.



Cassandra Nelson for Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps defines resilience as the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses. Despite years of aid, vulnerable families worldwide continue to teeter between survival and disaster. To better understand why this pattern persists, and to put limited resources toward the most effective responses, Mercy Corps is actively pursuing answers to the key question: Which capacities are most important for supporting resilience **at which stage, for whom, and for which types of shocks?**

Nowhere is answering this question more critical than across the Sahel, a region plagued by chronic poverty, food insecurity, drought, ecosystem degradation, and conflict. Mercy Corps conducted field research in Mali, Niger, and Northern Nigeria to examine the differing vulnerabilities and capacities of men, women, boys, and girls to understand what helps build the resilience of individuals, households, and communities. We found numerous structural barriers and unequal power dynamics that need to be addressed to ensure a truly resilient Sahel. Among the many factors, one issue looms largest: gender inequality.

Mercy Corps believes that **it is impossible to build resilience in households and communities without also addressing systemic gender inequality.** As an aid community, when we do not account for and address gender inequality, we ignore factors that entrench vulnerability for the entire population. We also miss factors that would enable us to support households and communities to become more resilient.

## **Mercy Corps' research in the Sahel indicates that:**

- **Gender influences sensitivity to disturbances and, even within the same household, individuals will experience shocks and stresses in different ways.** For example, drought and erratic rainfall increase the workload of women and girls on family farms because they must walk longer distances and spend more time securing water for cooking, household sanitation needs, and caretaking of animals. Additional time spent on resource collection means less time available for education, income generation, or household food production – all of which are cornerstones for resilient individuals and households.
- **Men, women, boys, and girls differ in their perceptions of the impact of shocks.** In Niger, women were the only population group to identify diseases that affect poultry as one of the most important threats in their community, likely because chickens are among the few resources they control and use for income generation. Selling (or eating) poultry is often the first line of defense for households facing a crisis. In contrast, boys in peri-urban areas in Mali were the only group to cite teacher strikes and interruptions in schooling as one of the key shocks they face. These interruptions have prolonged the time it takes for youth to obtain a degree, making it even more difficult to secure employment in a poor job market.





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- **Gender also influences the skills, strategies, and mechanisms individuals use to cope with and adapt to disturbances.**

For example, women reduce the amount they eat so their children and husbands have enough. Small livestock, typically owned by women and youth, is sold first in hard times. In Mali, older girls report “dating” multiple men to get money and gifts (such as food) during lean times. As “breadwinners,” men and boys report they migrate across and within borders to find work and face both high-interest loans to finance their dangerous travel and weakened social safety nets. These gender-differentiated coping mechanisms often have both direct and indirect consequences that place individuals and their households at greater risk to future shocks.

## **Mercy Corps’ Recommendations:**

These findings reinforce the importance of **gender integration in programming as a critical component for enhancing household and community resilience**. Underpinning gender integration are three key facets: **increased access to and control of capital** for transforming unequal relationships and systems; **empowerment** of excluded and vulnerable groups through the **engagement of gatekeepers**; and **inclusion** as a necessary social dimension for household and community resilience.

To adequately integrate gender in resilience-focused efforts, Mercy Corps recommends that international aid organizations:

- Design and implement a gender assessment as part of a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) prior to program design.
- Provide opportunities for women and girls to build bonds by creating or strengthening “safe spaces” and support networks, including through tontines and village savings and loan associations (VSLAs).
- Strengthen women and youth’s connections to networks across and outside their communities, as well as their links to informal and formal governance structures, and empower women and youth in collective action processes, including disaster risk reduction, natural resource management, conflict resolution, and social protection processes.
- Increase women and girls’ access to and control over productive inputs (including land, financial services, and agricultural resources), extension services, and technologies, while also engaging gatekeepers to garner support and minimize backlash.
- When possible, partner with and build on the work of local women’s organizations – including informal organizations – that have a wealth of untapped information.

A gender-integrated approach that empowers women and girls, while also engaging men and boys, will be crucial for achieving long-term positive change, transforming deeply entrenched inequality, and strengthening resilience in the Sahel.

## CONTEXT

The Sahel – an ecological transition zone between the Sahara Desert to the north and the Sudan Savanna to the south (see Figure 1) – is a region in flux. In recent years, communities throughout the Sahel have experienced profound political, economic, and environmental changes. Ecosystem degradation, severe droughts, and unchecked population growth have placed tens of millions of individuals at risk of catastrophic food and livelihood insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Market distortions – such as the dramatic increases in the prices of food staples and generally weak public institutions – have further constrained the ability of poor, rural households to meet their basic needs.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these challenges, ongoing ethnic, territorial, and political conflicts have caused mass migration, which in turn has heightened tensions as especially vulnerable populations are forced to compete for access to critical resources such as health services, education, water, and land.<sup>3</sup>

Recent, repeated, large-scale disasters in the Sahel – and the plight of millions of households experiencing protracted crises – have drawn the attention of local and international policy makers, humanitarian agencies, and development actors. But the response to such catastrophes has failed to account for the fact that the region's widespread food insecurity, chronic instability, and mortality are not due to isolated climate trends or conflict. They are, in fact, the result of complex interactions between political, economic, social, and environmental factors.<sup>4</sup> Such approaches have also failed to systematically account for the connection between gender inequality, exclusion, and increased vulnerability in the Sahel.

## MOVING BEYOND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Mercy Corps has recognized that despite saving lives, previous emergency and development responses in the Sahel have not increased the capacity of affected populations to withstand future disturbances or adapt in a way that reduces their exposure and sensitivity to similar events in the future. Accordingly, what's vital to improving this capacity is the understanding of the key systems within which communities exist, the threats they face, and their existing vulnerabilities and capacities for resilience. Identifying which capacities are most important for supporting resilience **at which stage, for whom, and for which types of shocks** is a needed component of any development intervention. Without it, we won't reach the most vulnerable and our valuable money and resources will not be maximized.

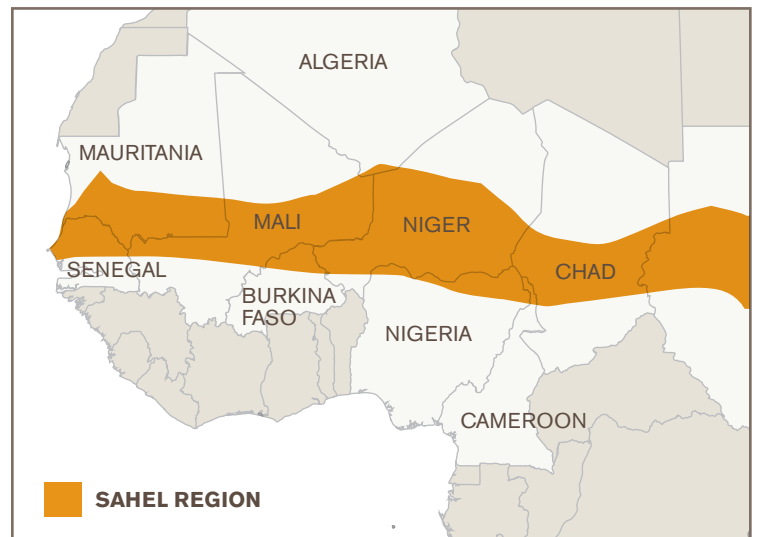


FIGURE 1: MAP OF THE SAHEL

The Population Council

### Mercy Corps in the Sahel

- Operating in the Sahel since 2005
- Currently working in Mali, Niger, and Northern Nigeria
- Sahel region is one of the agency's four "resilience hubs"

1 Gubbels, Peter. (2012).

2 European Commission. (2012).

3 Gubbels, Peter. (2012).

4 Frankenberger, Timothy; Spangler, Tom; Nelson, Suzanne; Langworthy, Mark. (2012).

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Mercy Corps defines resilience as the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses. Mercy Corps partners with communities as they leverage market, governance, and civil society systems to reduce vulnerabilities and increase their collective capacities for resilience.

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## BREAKING THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE: GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE SAHEL

Gender inequality in the Sahel is pervasive, perpetuated by factors such as poverty, lack of necessary health services, low levels of education, and early or forced marriage for girls. This inequality influences individuals' access to resources and capital. It impacts how decisions are made at household and community levels. And it affects how systems, including informal and formal governance systems, serve the needs and build the adaptive capacities of different gender groups. **To promote resilience, efforts must address the structural causes of gender inequality that entrench vulnerability.**

Continuing discrimination – in education, health care, employment, and control of property – inevitably makes women and girls more vulnerable to shocks and stresses in the Sahel. Therefore, programming to develop coping and adapting skills must be combined with programming that tackles the systemic inequality that make marginalized groups more vulnerable in the first place. As stated in an Oxfam briefing paper in May 2013, “This means challenging the social, economic, and political institutions that lock in security for some, but vulnerability for many [others].”<sup>5</sup>

Research reveals that disturbances and crises often reinforce inequality, making already-bad situations even worse for marginalized gender groups, especially women and girls.<sup>6</sup> In the Sahel, men, women, boys, and girls all experience vulnerabilities to shocks and stresses that decrease their capacity to adapt to adversity and contribute to change. Women and girls, however, are often exposed to additional, gender-specific barriers – due to socially constructed gender roles and power relations – that consistently render them more vulnerable to the impacts of disturbances. These barriers amplify their vulnerability and undermine their ability to cope with the effects of disasters.<sup>7</sup> They also prevent them from utilizing their specific skills and knowledge to improve how well their households and the broader community adapt after a shock or stress.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, understanding resilience requires closer scrutiny of the power relations that determine who has access to which resources, who acquires what skills, who makes decisions, and who is excluded.<sup>9</sup>

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### Gender influences:

- Sensitivity to disturbances (i.e., the degree to which an individual, household, or community will be affected)
  - Perceptions of disturbances
  - Strategies used to cope with disturbances
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5 Oxfam Briefing Paper. (May 2013).

6 UNISDR, UNDP, and ISDR. (June 2009), pg iv.

7 ActionAid Vulnerability Analysis Guide, page 7.

8 Schalatek, Liane and Burns, Katya. (June 20, 2013).

9 ActionAid Vulnerability Analysis Guide, page 8.

## METHODOLOGY

From June 2013 to January 2014, Mercy Corps conducted a literature review, gender analyses, and field research in Mali, Niger, and Northern Nigeria to examine the differing vulnerabilities and capacities of men, women, boys, and girls in the Sahel. We found numerous structural barriers and unequal power dynamics based on ethnicity, religion, class, and age that need to be addressed to ensure a truly resilient Sahel. Among these many environmental, economic, and social factors one issue looms largest: gender inequality. **Mercy Corps believes that it is impossible to build resilience in households and communities without also addressing systemic gender inequality.**

In reaching this conclusion, Mercy Corps explored three primary questions in its gender and resilience research:

- How does gender influence the experiences, vulnerabilities, and capacities of men, women, girls, and boys in the face of recurring shocks and stresses?
- Will integrating gender, empowering women and girls, and promoting inclusion in Mercy Corps' programming in the Sahel lead individuals, households, and communities further along the resilience pathway?
- What steps do development actors need to take to integrate gender and address gender inequality in its resilience-focused efforts?

## KEY FINDINGS

**1. Gender influences sensitivity to disturbances and, even within the same household, individuals will experience shocks and stresses in different ways.** Individuals are often affected by disturbances in accordance with their roles and responsibilities. For example:

- Environmental shocks and stresses in the Sahel have contributed to higher work burdens, especially for women and girls. Drought and erratic rainfall have increased their workload on family farms and in gathering water for animals. In general, women and girls' livelihood activities become more difficult as less water is available. In addition, water shortages can render their ability to care for children more burdensome and make it more difficult to meet family sanitation needs.<sup>10</sup>
- Security conditions and conflict affect men and women differently. Young men are at major risk of exploitation and manipulation by militant groups, whereas women and girls are more likely to be exposed to abuse and face higher risk of sexual violence. During conflict, women and girls face increased insecurity while traveling, gathering firewood or water, and going to marketplaces.
- Men who own and care for livestock must often contend with cattle rustling as well as with drought that reduces the availability of good forage for their herds. These shocks can put men at greater risk for exposure to conflict over resources and land. Cattle rustling also negatively affects women and youth by limiting dairy production and associated revenues.
- Human diseases are likely to have a disproportionately large effect on women and girls, who are responsible for taking care of sick family members.

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<sup>10</sup> IFAD. (2010).

**2. Men, women, boys, and girls not only experience shocks differently, they also differ in their perceptions of the impact of shocks.** While all gender groups typically identify and agree on weather-related hazards, each group prioritizes those hazards that most directly affect them. For example, in focus group discussions in Niger, women, but not men, identified diseases that affect poultry as one of the most important threats in their community.<sup>11</sup> This shows how important poultry is for women's livelihoods, as smaller livestock are more likely to be one of the few resources they control. These smaller animals are also more likely to be sold or used to meet needs in the face of recurrent crises (e.g., chickens are quick to raise and the eggs can be sold) making them essential resources for helping households cope during difficult times. Poultry disease, therefore, not only threatens a critical source of income for women, but also a commonly-used form of household insurance against shocks. Boys in peri-urban areas in Mali were the only group to cite teacher strikes and interruptions in schooling as one of the key shocks they face,<sup>12</sup> referencing extended delays in their education that have worsened their employment prospects and abilities to earn income. Men in Niger and in Mali cited community-level threats such as conflict over resources due to lack of land and the presence of migrating pastoralists and refugees from Northern Mali. Each of these perceived threats aligns with their roles as heads of household and leaders within the community.<sup>13</sup>

In interviews with women's organizations in the Sahel and beyond, Oxfam Canada found that women identify risks that are often absent from "mainstream resilience frameworks." Women emphasize "risks that originate at the household level, that are rooted in gender inequality, and that are exacerbated by cultural stereotypes about women's roles and ability to engage in decision making. They also [cite] barriers to building resilience that are linked to sexual stereotypes, care responsibilities and time poverty."<sup>14</sup> Mercy Corps' gender analyses reported similar findings. For example, women and girls in focus groups identified divorce, widowhood, and forced marriage as some of the biggest threats to their lives and livelihoods.<sup>15</sup> These idiosyncratic shocks often result in women losing

## **"They are Selling our Forests" Examining the Differential Impacts of Deforestation in the Sahel**

Young men and boys in Mali reported collecting mass amounts of firewood to sell during the lean season. In Nigeria, men dominate the timber industry. These individuals are more likely to benefit in the short- and medium-term from deforestation, though their activities and livelihoods suffer in the longer-term.

Women throughout the Sahel cite deforestation as a major, immediate threat to their livelihoods. In Mali, women report having to walk farther distances to collect firewood for cooking – reducing the amount of time they have for income-generating activities – and also report having access to fewer shea trees, the nuts of which they grind to produce and sell shea butter. In Nigeria, women who use trees for herbs or other properties, report losing these sources of livelihoods. Urban women in Nigeria's Edo and Delta States, however, report benefiting from deforestation in the short- and medium-term, as they manage profitable small businesses as timber converters (paying a sawmill to cut wood, then selling planks). This suggests that the specific impacts of deforestation and degraded natural resources do not only vary considerably by gender, but also by location.

11 Mercy Corps FGD with women, Maradi: listed bird flu as major threat, with consequences such as loss of poultry stock, and loss of revenue source

12 Mercy Corps FGD with boys, Kati: older boys cited teacher strikes at The University of Bamako as one of the most important threats they face since it impacts their ability to access education.

13 Mercy Corps FGDs with men in Filingué and Maradi.

14 Oxfam Canada. (September 2013).

15 Mercy Corps FGDs with women in Filingué, women and girls in Maradi.





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their assets, especially in cases in which marriage is governed by customary laws that do not protect women's rights to property or resources.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Gender influences the skills, strategies, and mechanisms individuals use to cope with and adapt to disturbances.**

The coping and adaptation strategies of men, women, girls, and boys vary considerably, and women and girls often face constraints that limit their capacity to respond to hazards, based on traditional gender roles. Gender analyses in the Sahel have found that women and girls in rural areas typically have livelihoods that are heavily dependent on natural resources, yet they lack the information, decision-making power, and influence that is necessary to adapt to the effects of

climate-related disturbances and ensure conservation of natural resources. Unequal access to and control over productive and financial resources were also found to limit the ability of women and youth to adapt to shocks and stresses. As a result of limited access to credit and control over productive resources, women are often less able to diversify or utilize improved varieties of crops and small livestock that are better able to withstand drought or pests. They also face major barriers to technical assistance. For instance, extension services are typically male-dominated, in part due to women's limited mobility, which may impede their access. Additionally, women, who typically own small plots of land, often don't have access to technologies that are tailored to their needs and that can reduce their workload.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these hurdles, women and girls are finding ways to cope with disturbances in the Sahel. They are adjusting to changing social and natural environments, organizing to collectively address problems, drawing on traditional

knowledge, and improvising skills to face difficulties.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, however, they have to resort to negative coping mechanisms that put them at risk or increase their sensitivity to future shocks. (See examples of these coping mechanisms in the summary on page 6.) Poverty and marginalization do not necessarily mean passivity in the face of shocks or stresses,<sup>19</sup> however with few options or opportunities, women and girls are often forced to resort to the least bad alternative out of a range of bad alternatives available to them. In all three villages in Mali where focus groups were held, women were identified (by men, women, and youth) as those facing the "heaviest burdens" during crises, primarily because they are tasked with "sustaining" the family.<sup>20</sup>

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*"We should congratulate and thank our women for every single thing they are doing ... Women are supporting this town ... Women are taking care of [their] families. During difficult times, it is the women that are helping us survive."*

— Suli Ibrahim during focus group with men in Kati village, Mali (1.15.14)

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16 Peterman. (2010).

17 Olawoye et. al. (2010), pp 8-10.

18 GROOTS International. (2011).

19 GROOTS International. (2011).

20 FGDs with men, women, boys and girls in Kati, Sanankoroba, Galo.



## Examples of coping mechanisms cited during focus groups

**Selling assets:** Small livestock typically owned and used for income generation by women and youth are often sold first to help households absorb shocks.

**Borrowing money or food from relatives or other community members:** Reliance on family, friends, and neighbors for financial loans or gifts is a crucial component of surviving economic hardship in the Sahel.<sup>21</sup> Utilizing social networks is a vital coping strategy for the rural poor, especially women, who often fail to receive necessary governmental assistance. Tontines – informal savings and loan groups where money is pooled and distributed on a rotating basis – serve as a “safety net” that women can rely on when they are unable to meet their basic needs. Nonetheless, the amount of money the tontine is able to loan at one time is quite small. In addition to loans, focus groups also cited coping strategies such as sharing and rotating meals with neighbors. While this strategy can help deal with food shortages in the immediate term, over extended periods and as resources are continuously depleted, this may not be possible.

**Reducing food intake:** Women report reducing the amount they eat and ensuring that their children and husbands are fed first; they also report foraging for wild plants to supplement meals. The reduction in the amount of food consumed is particularly problematic for adolescent girls and women who are pregnant or lactating, as it can have long lasting effects on the health and well-being of their offspring.

**Taking children out of school:** To save money on school fees and to have children help generate household income, families may take children out of school. While focus groups report an equal likelihood of taking girls or boys out of primary school, girls were more likely to be taken out of secondary school during a difficult time.<sup>23</sup> In Niger, low levels of primary- and secondary-level education are a reality for both boys and girls, however, gender roles and norms disadvantage girls' access to education. This leads to much lower primary and secondary education rates (primary net attendance ratio = 31% girls vs. 44% boys; secondary net attendance ratio = 8% girls vs. 13% boys.)<sup>24</sup>

**Distress migration:** Lack of economic opportunity, spreading conflict, and worsening environmental conditions have resulted in male migration within and across borders. Because they are expected to be the “breadwinners” of the family and are typically more mobile than women and girls, migrating for income-generating opportunities has become a common practice for men and boys. This practice results in various risks for men and boys, including but not limited to:

- Taking out high-interest loans to cover travel costs (that they are often unable to pay back);
- Danger in travel (insecurity around certain travel routes);
- Illicit employment (extremist groups, trafficking);
- Multiple sexual partners, increasing risk of HIV infection and spreading HIV; and
- Weakened links to community and related safety nets.

Male migration may leave women and girls behind to take on new roles (e.g., managing food stocks), which can create opportunities to challenge discriminatory social norms. But these changes can also exacerbate vulnerabilities as women and youth may have increased responsibility for household needs without the necessary control over resources or decision-making power. Furthermore, as men who migrate contribute less and less to family incomes, women are expected to expand their productive role to earn additional income for their households. In some cases, women are becoming “de facto heads of households” without a corresponding increase in influence or access to financial, technological, and social resources, ultimately increasing the vulnerability of their households.

**Prostitution:** Various focus groups cited that some women and older girls in villages resort to prostitution during shocks and stresses. In Mali, older girls reported “dating” multiple men to get money and gifts (such as food) during lean times.<sup>25</sup> They noted that they are often expected – and cannot refuse – to have sex with these men, and keep the fact that they have numerous sexual partners hidden from their parents.

21 FGD participants mentioned there is a certain level of shame associated with asking in-laws for a loan, so that is often a last resort.

22 FGD with women - Diago; Sanakoroba; Galo.

23 FGD with women, Galo. It was also reported that girls in Galo are less likely to be enrolled in secondary school to begin with, especially if the secondary school is outside the village and requires significant travel, or if the girl is married off at a young age.

24 UNICEF Niger Statistics.

25 FGD with older girls, Sanakoroba.



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## RETHINKING RESILIENCE: PRIORITIZING GENDER INTEGRATION AND RESILIENCE

Gaps between males and females result in different levels of exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stresses. These gaps include unequal access to education and income opportunities, unequal access to land and other productive resources, and discriminatory social practices that limit rights and opportunities for women and youth to fully participate in society.<sup>26</sup> Although evidence from around the globe suggests that women and girls play a critical and potentially transformative role in addressing food insecurity within

their households and communities, throughout the Sahel they continue to face cultural, political, and financial obstacles that result in an overreliance on negative coping mechanisms. In turn, this overreliance further hinders their prospects – and the prospects of their households and communities – for building resilience.

Importantly, these obstacles also typically result in the exclusion of women and girls from household and community decision-making, which impedes the abilities of households and communities to mitigate and recover from disturbances. Therefore, to improve the resilience of vulnerable populations in the Sahel, Mercy Corps proposes a new model of intervention that addresses and transforms the systems and practices that have perpetuated gender inequality. Governments, donors, and implementers must commit to gender integration by including gender in all aspects of the program cycle and reshaping policies to address underlying structural issues that exclude women, boys, and girls.

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A gender-integrated approach makes men's, women's, boys', and girls' concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs. A gender-integrated approach to resilience addresses gender-specific vulnerabilities to identified shocks and stresses and builds on gender-specific capacities, while also understanding that perception, exposure, and sensitivity to disturbances are gender-differentiated.

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## THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING GENDER INTO RESILIENCE

The capacity for resilience has often been linked to access and utilization of human, social, financial, physical, natural, or political capital.<sup>27</sup> Tangible and intangible assets allow individuals, households, and communities to meet their basic needs, and a greater diversity of assets reduces vulnerability to shocks. Access to and control over the capital necessary for adaptation varies within communities and households, and is influenced by power structures, including gender norms. Mercy Corps' research in the Sahel identified trends suggesting that women and youth have less access to and control of capital than their adult male counterparts.

When gender-specific needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities are understood, and program activities address structural gender inequalities, including deficits in capital, we can influence three interdependent pathways of empowerment by increasing women's and youth's access to and control of:

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<sup>26</sup> Frankenburger, et.al. (2012). Pg 18.

<sup>27</sup> IFRC. (June 2012).



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- **Financial, physical, and natural capital – empowerment through increased access to and control over financial, physical, and natural resources and assets.** Mercy Corps' research shows that unequal access to and control over productive and financial resources limits women's and youth's ability to adapt to shocks and stresses. For example, women are less able to diversify or utilize improved varieties of crops and small livestock because of limited access to credit or control over productive resources. Lack of these assets also inhibits resilience of the broader household. Female labor force participation has been found to play a key role in cushioning households from the impact of

macroeconomic shocks and in keeping households from falling into poverty.<sup>28</sup> Findings from the post-project evaluation of Mercy Corps' USAID-funded MILK program support this analysis, and indicate that increasing the financial assets and entrepreneurial training of women made the most difference in helping participants, their families, and their networks, cope with the 2012 food crisis in Niger.<sup>29</sup>

- **Human capital – empowerment through increased access to and control over knowledge, skills, and information.** Gender analyses in the Sahel show that although rural women and girls are heavily dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, they lack critical skills, information, and decision-making power to adapt to climate change impacts and conserve natural resources. They also face numerous barriers to accessing education. While increasing women and girls' human capital has been linked to increases in their own well-being and empowerment, it can also have far-reaching impacts. For example, a child born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past age five.<sup>30</sup> In Mali, women with secondary education (or higher) have an average of three children, whereas women with no education have an average of seven children, placing additional stress on a household's limited resources.<sup>31</sup> This has implications for the expanding population in the Sahel, which continues to put an enormous strain on education and health services, agricultural production, and natural resources. Increasing women and girls' human capital can lead to changes in behavior and increased control over the number of children they have, reducing the stress placed on household and community resources.



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Women and girls don't live in isolation – they are surrounded by their families and communities. Successfully increasing women's and girls' access to decision-making and livelihood opportunities requires the support and engagement of key gatekeepers including their male relatives and community leaders. This is a critical aspect of the pathway to empowerment.

28 USAID. (October 2013).  
29 Mercy Corps. (November 2013a).  
30 UNESCO. (2010).  
31 UNESCO. (2010).



- **Social and political capital – empowerment through increased access to and influence in social networks, market systems, decision-making structures, and governance institutions.** Utilizing social networks is a vital coping strategy for the rural poor, especially women. A number of researchers have found that women often depend more on informal relations and thus form stronger kinship and friendship relations than men, who tend to rely more on formal relationships.<sup>32</sup> According to Agarwal (2000), “...women have a greater need to build up social capital through localized networks, since women’s avenues for accumulating economic resources and their physical mobility is typically more restricted than men’s. They also have a greater need to sustain these networks, given their fewer exit options and lesser intra-household bargaining power.” Findings from the Sahel suggest that women and girls may lack the time or space to gather, seek support, or stay informed. Their ability to strengthen and maintain social ties can also be limited by the considerable restrictions on their freedom of movement.

Narrowing the “gender-asset gap” and increasing women and youth’s control over capital, improves their empowerment and well-being, while simultaneously leading to improved outcomes for their families and communities.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, we believe that **increasing their access to and control of capital improves resilience at both the household and community levels.**

At the household level, it allows women and youth to:

- Diversify their livelihood opportunities and their strategies for coping with disturbances.
- Participate in and influence household and community decision-making.

When women and youth have increased influence over **household decision-making** (and they are able to utilize more diverse livelihood opportunities and strategies for coping), the ability of the entire household to absorb, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses is increased.

Studies show that poverty and hunger are reduced when women gain more intra-household bargaining power, more control over decision-making, and more autonomy in the use of their time and the income that they generate.<sup>34</sup> There is strong evidence that the level of maternal endowments and degree of empowerment within the household are two of the most influential factors determining child health and nutrition, especially during shocks and stresses.<sup>35</sup> A 2013 study conducted by Mercy Corps found that during the 2010-2011 drought and famine in Southern Somalia, women with more power over decisions in their homes had the confidence to negotiate with elites to gain access to essential services and were thus better able to feed and care for their children during shocks. “Female involvement in household decision making was strongly linked with greater household dietary diversity and less distressful coping in the face of the complex crisis.”<sup>36</sup> This finding suggests that resilience programming should seek to strengthen female engagement in and influence over productive decisions.

At the community level, increased access to and control of capital allows women and youth to:

- Access resources necessary to actively participate in **community-level processes.**
- Obtain the skills necessary to become more empowered and utilize both tangible and intangible assets to engage in community-level processes.

When women and youth are better engaged and have the resources, assets, and skills necessary to influence **community processes**, critical processes for **community collective action** are strengthened,

32 Agarwal. (2000).

33 Meinzen-Dick, R., et al. (2011).

34 USAID. (October 2013).

35 USAID. (October 2013).

36 Mercy Corps. (November 2013b).



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especially those that are needed to respond to shocks and stresses in the Sahel. These processes can include disaster risk recovery, natural resource management, conflict management, and social protection. When these processes are more inclusive, community collective action will be more sustainable and, ultimately, more effective.

Although the impact of inclusion on collective action is a nascent field of study, evidence implies that meaningful engagement of women in local decision-making results in increased collaboration and leads to increased solidarity and conflict mitigation. This is especially evident in natural resource management. In a study that analyzed a total of 46 men's, women's, and mixed natural-resource management groups (looking at 33 rural programs in 20 countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia), Westermann, et al., found that "collaboration, solidarity, and conflict resolution all increase in groups where women are present."<sup>37</sup> Additionally, "norms of reciprocity are more likely to operate in women's and mixed groups [and] the capacity for self-sustaining collective action increased with women's presence."<sup>38</sup>

The empowerment of women and girls, and the engagement of men and boys, is crucial for building resilience in the Sahel. Improving access to resources and empowering decision-making of women and youth allows them to capitalize on their social networks, knowledge, and skills to build long-term, positive change in their homes and communities.

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*"The need for an inclusive and holistic approach to vulnerability reduction and resilience building has never been more urgent and the effectiveness of gender approaches never more evident."*<sup>39</sup> – Elaine Enarson and P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Women and girls across the Sahel face structural inequality and limited access to resources and decision-making, which often leads to their increased vulnerability to the range of recurring shocks and long-term stresses in the region. Despite the challenges they face, women and girls, as well as men and boys, have unique knowledge and skills to contribute to absorbing, adapting, and transforming in the face of crises. Although shocks and stresses can cause terrible destruction, in some instances they open up opportunities for positive change, enabling women and men to take on new and more progressive gender roles.<sup>40</sup> Shocks – natural and man-made, sudden and foreseen – can undermine the foundations of communities throughout the region, but may also provide opportunities to begin to transform deeply entrenched inequality. As the Hausa proverb says, "If the drumbeat changes, the dance must also change."<sup>41</sup> Seizing the opportunities that disturbances offer, however, requires aid organizations to recognize that women and girls possess experience and skills that can be used to prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises.

37 Westermann, Olaf; Ashby, Jacqueline; and Pretty, Jules. (2005).

38 Westermann, Olaf; Ashby, Jacqueline; and Pretty, Jules. (2005).

39 Enarson, Elaine and Dhar Chakrabarti, P.G. (2009).

40 Horton, Lynn. (2012).

41 Gubbels, Peter. (2012).

The gender-related practices and policies of aid organizations have seen much progress in recent years. But there are still numerous examples of humanitarian and development work that could have delivered better results had gender analysis and gender equality been central to relief operations.<sup>42</sup> To assist donor agencies and aid practitioners, Mercy Corps has developed recommendations for integrating gender into resilience-focused efforts in the Sahel. Key considerations for incorporating a gender approach are provided on three levels:

- **Program recommendations for implementing organizations;**
- **Process recommendations for implementing organizations;** and
- **Recommendations for donor policies and practices.**

While recommendations have been crafted for the specific context of the Sahel, many of these can be adapted and applied to other regions, contexts, and technical areas.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATIONS: INCORPORATING GENDER INTO RESILIENCE PROGRAMMING

1. **Strengthen the social capital of women and girls by providing opportunities to build bonds through “safe spaces” and support networks; to connect with groups and networks across and outside their communities; and to link with informal and formal governance structures.** Activities that build bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are thought to be especially important in enabling individuals, households, and communities to respond to shocks and stresses. Implementing organizations should seek to strengthen women and girls’:
  - **Bonding social capital:** In focus groups conducted in the Sahel, women and girls report a lack of time and space to gather, seek support, and stay informed. Resilience programming should seek to reduce time burdens, provide “safe spaces,” and promote opportunities for women and girls to meet, share information, and strengthen ties, including through existing structures such as tontines and village savings

Social capital can be described as the quantity and quality of social resources (e.g., networks, membership in groups, social relations, and access to wider institutions in society) upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods. There are three “types” of social capital commonly cited:

- **Bonding** social capital is best described as “horizontal” ties between individuals who are similar to each other and may live within close proximity to one another
- **Bridging** social capital connects members of one community or group to other communities/groups. Bridging social capital often crosses lines, boundaries, and groups, and makes a direct contribution to community resilience in that those with social ties outside their immediate community can draw on these links when local resources are insufficient or unavailable. Additionally, because contact with close friends and relations is more regular, interaction with those outside of one’s immediate network is more likely to provide new perspectives and resources.
- **Linking** social capital is seen in trusted social networks between individuals and groups that interact across explicit, institutionalized, formal boundaries in society. Linking social capital is often conceived of as a vertical link between a network and some form of authority or power.

Definitions and descriptions adapted from Frankenberger, et al., October 2013.

42 Hoare, Joanna; et al. (2012).



and loan associations. Evidence suggests that opportunities for women and girls to build, strengthen, and maintain social networks are critical for tool, information, and resource sharing – especially during shocks – and that women and girls rely heavily on their social ties to cope with disturbances and fill gaps in the absence of state and private organizations.

- **Bridging social capital:** This could include programming that, for example, connects male and female savings groups or co-ops within a village, or programming that provides opportunities for women’s producer associations from nearby villages to connect through information exchange and market programs. Reinforcing women’s expertise through peer learning exchanges would create the opportunity to transfer their best practices and skills to other risk-prone communities. Programming that increases women and girls’ social capital can enhance resilience by expanding their access to external knowledge, skills, and information; facilitating the adoption of new technologies; and helping them reach new markets – all of which can enable them to better adapt to shocks and stresses.
- **Linking social capital:** Across the Sahel, women and youth are typically excluded from community-level governance systems. Their anemic participation on such committees often stems from lack of education and unequal control over resources, and ultimately restricts their ability to participate in responses to shocks and stresses. Research suggests that without linking connections to extra-local organizations, groups may be able to “get by” but will have difficulty “getting ahead.”<sup>43</sup> Agencies should facilitate the creation of inclusive community structures that equitably engage men, women, girls, and boys. At the same time, organizations should ensure programming addresses the structural inequalities and norms that typically inhibit women and youth from influencing community processes, including excessive burdens on time, lack of mobility, and insufficient access and control of resources. Programming that increases women, girls’ and male youth’s access to and influence in diverse institutional structures will ensure more inclusive governance and protection mechanisms that are ultimately more sustainable, collaborative, and better able to serve the needs of all members of the community.

**2. Improve women and girls’ access to and control over productive inputs (land, financial services, agricultural tools, etc.), resources, and technologies to contribute to greater resilience in the face of shocks and stresses.** Unequal access to productive inputs and physical, financial, and natural resources has constrained the ability of women and girls to cope with and adapt to climate change and environmental degradation. Examples of programming to address this discrepancy include increasing access to improved seeds and hardier animal breeds, and providing opportunities to access loans and invest in other livelihood activities (as a diversification strategy).

**3. Research and develop gender-sensitive agricultural practices and technologies, and promote gender-sensitive extension and technical-service provision.**

Implementing organizations should include men and women (and, where appropriate, boys and girls) in the design and testing of new technologies to better gear them toward the needs of different groups across livelihood zones. Further study is needed to understand the different effects of new technologies on men, women, boys, and girls. For example, agricultural techniques that emphasize decreased time spent preparing farm fields (often the responsibility of men and boys) will decrease men’s work burden. The benefits for the rest of the family (women and girls),



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43 Aldrich. (2012).



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however, are not necessarily evident, as it depends how that time saved by men and boys is spent. When possible and appropriate, technology to reduce the workloads of women and girls should be promoted, including the introduction of labor-reducing technologies for agro-processing. It is important to recognize that time-saving technology can lead to encroachment of men into traditionally female roles, for example, grinding of millet or production of shea butter. Therefore, efforts to increase access to assets and new technologies should be coupled with efforts that increase

sensitization of gatekeepers and increase the negotiating power of women (see recommendation #5). To ensure women and girls are informed about sustainable agriculture practices, programming should support capacity building opportunities for women-led producer groups and cooperatives (which tend to be more informal and have fewer resources than male-led groups).

- 4. Ensure programming aimed at improving women and girls' skills, economic opportunities, and empowerment is coupled with programming that engages gatekeepers.** Programs must ensure an approach that seeks support from surrounding community members and minimizes the potential for backlash to changes in gender roles and access to and control over resources. Gatekeepers can include husbands, mothers, fathers, mothers-in-law, male relatives, and co-wives, as well as faith and traditional leaders. Assessments of power structures and relationships should inform this process and gatekeepers should be included and engaged early in program implementation (if not during initial program design).
- 5. Mainstream protection in programming, with a focus on women and girls.** Although not directly covered in this brief, women and girls in the Sahel are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, and may face increased risk during shocks. Agencies must consider how programs will increase or decrease vulnerability of women and girls to gender-based violence (GBV). To do so, implementing organizations should work with target communities to minimize protection risks in programming and capitalize on partnerships with organizations working in social protection (e.g., referral systems for GBV survivor support services). In line with Do No Harm principles, programming at a minimum must ensure it does not increase risks of GBV.<sup>44</sup>
- 6. Tailor programming for men and boys.** Although much of this analysis focuses on addressing the marginalization of women and girls, programming should also target and create opportunities for young men and boys, who face their own vulnerabilities in the Sahel, requiring further engagement. Low levels of education, lack of employment and livelihood opportunities, and a marginalized role in household and community decision-making restrict the ability of young men and boys to contribute to household and community resilience. In the face of poor economic conditions, young men may migrate in search of employment, turn to illicit activities, or both, exposing themselves to exploitation and other risks. Agencies should explore new opportunities to contribute to skills, literacy, and vocational training for young men. Programming that builds these capacities should be coupled with programming that increases the demand for youth employment.

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44 See Mercy Corps' Gender Procedures at <http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/genderprocedures.pdf> for additional information and resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTERS: INCORPORATING GENDER INTO ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES



Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

- 1. Design and implement a gender assessment as part of a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) prior to program design and conceptualization.** In order to adequately assess how shocks and stresses influence gender vulnerabilities and responses, agencies should incorporate a gender assessment into any tools designed for a VCA. Gender assessments should include an analysis of social power and relationships within households and communities so programming does not create a backlash or deteriorate women and girls' relationships with their male counterparts. Finally, when conducting gender assessments, and the broader VCA, separate focus group discussions should be held for men, women, boys, and girls, and female staff members should be responsible for collecting data from female beneficiaries.
- 2. Ensure project staff – including project management and field teams – have received training on gender sensitivity.** A lack of gender training and gender analysis tools are barriers to integrating gender in resilience programming. All program staff should be familiar with key gender concerns, and gender training should be incorporated into each new employee's orientation and should be refreshed periodically.
- 3. When possible, partner with and build on the work of local women's organizations – including informal organizations.** Women's community-based organizations understand the social conditions of vulnerability facing local women and have vital local knowledge, social networks, and insight into community history that is needed for vulnerability assessments. They are likely to be a good source of information about trends and patterns on social vulnerability, such as the proportion of women who are unemployed or heads of households. Such groups also know both the difficult living conditions of women and their families and the coping strategies they use to stay afloat. In many cases, they have connections that are multigenerational and deeply rooted, especially in remote communities. Women's community organizations typically know which women and families will be hit the hardest and to whom they will turn for help.<sup>45</sup>
- 4. Develop indicators to monitor progress and to better measure and evaluate empowerment, inclusion, and resilience.** Monitoring data should be disaggregated by sex and age throughout the course of programming, and mid-term and final evaluations should include specific analysis of behavior changes toward women. Participation in community and household decision-making should be measured, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods should be used to evaluate whether influence has increased at the household and community-levels. Additional gender indicators should be monitored over the course of the programming, including monitoring of access and control of resources, and adjustments to programming should be made as necessary.
- 5. Develop an exit strategy that takes into account the safety of participants and sustainability of development gains after project completion.** Gender relations are often precarious, especially in times when communities are facing shocks and stresses, so agencies should strive to ensure that their exit from a community does not destabilize relations. Engagement with gatekeepers throughout

45 Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response. (February 2008).



program implementation is essential for dealing with any potential backlash created by programming, and for ensuring sustainability once a program concludes. Agencies must ensure they use an approach that seeks support and buy-in from surrounding community members in order to minimize the potential for negative – and even violent – responses to changes around gender roles and access to and control over resources.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONOR AGENCIES AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: INCORPORATING GENDER INTO INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES AND PRACTICES**

- 1. Institutionalize a much greater focus on assessing and addressing the specific vulnerabilities faced by different gender groups, especially women and girls, during risk analyses and program design.** Donor agencies should require implementing organizations to assess whether certain gender groups are more dependent on assets and livelihood activities that are most exposed to, and likely to be negatively impacted by, disturbances. Assessments of vulnerabilities should also include an analysis of the most important structural factors – including disparities in social and economic power – that create or perpetuate vulnerabilities. Donors should require that implementing organizations examine whether local governance structures support and promote the active participation of vulnerable groups (including women and youth) in planning, decision-making, and implementation processes.
- 2. Require implementing organizations to assess the specific capacities of different gender groups, especially women and girls, during capacity assessments and program design.** Field assessments must include an analysis of the most important capacities that enable vulnerable groups to cope with and adapt to the shocks and stresses they face. This should include an assessment of how coping mechanisms differ by gender group, along with analysis of which gender groups are able to access opportunities in the broader social, ecological, or market systems to enable absorption and adaptation. Finally, organizations should be required to assess the forms of collective response used by communities to cope with shocks and stresses, and whether gender-differentiated responses have been utilized.
- 3. Promote the integration of gender issues in resilience-focused efforts by requiring sex- and age-disaggregated data, and the analysis of specific impacts that investments have on men, women, boys, and girls.** Donor agencies must ensure their monitoring and evaluation frameworks specifically examine the impacts their investments have on women and girls, whether directly or indirectly. Therefore, the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data should be mandated both for implementing partners and donor agencies. Furthermore, agencies should integrate gender indicators into evaluation systems, and gender-focused reporting and dissemination should be strengthened.
- 4. Develop guidance and resources to support the inclusion of a gender approach in resilience-focused programs.** This should include the development of a set of best practice case studies as to how donors and implementing agencies have integrated gender into resilience-focused programs. Mercy Corps believes that agencies should capture, synthesize, and codify “best practices” for integrating gender into programs and ensure the participation of female beneficiaries in vetting, testing and refining these identified “best practices.” In so doing, agencies should promote a gender-based approach to resilience programming that focuses on empowering women and girls while also engaging men and boys as additional community gatekeepers. Ideally, findings would be disseminated through peer-learning activities that engage researchers, practitioners, and other donor agencies on best practices for engaging men and boys, and empowering women and girls in activities that promote resilience.

- 5. Leverage technologies that break through gender barriers that currently impede the resilience of households in the Sahel, and disseminate innovative practices to regional stakeholders and implementing agencies.** Donors should promote gender-sensitive agricultural research and technology development and should support implementing agencies in the design and testing of technologies geared toward the needs of different gender groups. This should include funding for research that identifies local, low-cost technologies to reduce time burdens and increase household productivity, such as fuel-efficient cook stoves; wastewater reuse systems; and agro-product processing technologies.
- 6. Ensure protection is mainstreamed into all resilience programming and mandate that implementing agencies consider how resilience-focused activities will increase or decrease vulnerability of women and girls and boys to gender-based violence (GBV).** Outside agencies or governments should require that implementing organizations consider the risks programming can create when altering gender relations and power structures, and ensure that plans for identifying and addressing backlash are included as part of the program design process.
- 7. Encourage implementing organizations to engage and partner with women’s civil society organizations in the Sahel.** Many women’s organizations have critical, currently untapped knowledge, experience, and access to vulnerable populations, resources that should be utilized by aid agencies.
- 8. Support activities that focus on strengthening the social capital of women and youth, including those that enhance opportunities to build networks within and across communities, and activities that link marginalized groups with informal and formal governance structures.** It’s critical that this support include funding for activities that aim to address the structural inequalities and norms that inhibit women and youth from participating in collective action and influencing community processes, including excessive burdens on time, lack of mobility or access to “safe spaces,” and insufficient access and control of resources.

## CONCLUSIONS

Resilience programming will be stronger when it works with communities to address the relative inequalities faced by men, women, girls, and boys. Such an approach not only reduces harmful vulnerabilities, but increases the coping and adaptive abilities of individuals, households, and communities affected by shocks and stresses. When we acknowledge gender differences, gather gender-sensitive information, and integrate our findings into project design and delivery, we take necessary steps toward building resilience. When we engage men and other gatekeepers in an effort to create an enabling environment; when we increase women and youths’ access to resources and control over income or assets; and when we boost women and youths’ decision-making skills and influence within households and communities, we strengthen capacities to absorb and adapt to shocks and stresses, and we begin to transform the systems that entrench vulnerability.

The development community must account for and address gender inequality, or risk ignoring factors that intensify vulnerability for the entire population. It also risks missing those factors that would enable it to better support households and communities to become more resilient. Integrating gender into aid efforts is a necessary step in ensuring agencies enhance resilience in the Sahel and support the communities in which they work to become more productive, secure, and just.

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