

# How can Humanitarian Organisations Encourage More Women in Surge?

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TRANSFORMING  
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## Background

*“It’s very important for women to play a leadership role during emergencies. This can prevent serious violations like violence against women, including sexual violence and psychological violence. Women’s presence itself is a deterrence which safeguards women’s rights.”*

Nadege Pierre (33) – First responder in Hurricane Matthew response in Haiti (Oct 2016).

**Surge capacity** is defined as the ability to scale-up (and down) resources smoothly and quickly, including getting the right people to the right places doing the right things in the shortest amount of time possible. The majority of humanitarian responses rely heavily on good surge practice and having people quickly in place to meet the immediate needs of affected populations. This paper asserts that the ‘right people’ means a gender balance in our surge practice and therefore more women in surge roles. Women make up half the population, and are disproportionately affected by disasters. In order to meet the needs of women affected by disasters, we must ensure that women are equally represented in humanitarian response teams.

As humanitarian agencies, we have a duty of care to surge practitioners and therefore must address the specific support needs of women on surge rosters if we are to ensure their ongoing and increasing participation in surge and emergency response.

## Why does it matter?

In a world of ever-increasing humanitarian crises, women and girls are faced with specific and complex rights violations. Pre-existing gender inequalities at the household and community level can often limit a woman's ability to access relief, raise her voice and take leadership in humanitarian response.

Furthermore, the distinct critical and urgent needs of women tend to be overlooked in relief efforts which aggravates existing vulnerabilities. According to UNFPA, the health needs of women are still often neglected in crises – 60% of maternal deaths occur in countries affected by conflict or disaster.

Globally, over 35% of women have survived gender-based violence (GBV), and studies show that incidents of violence against women increase in humanitarian crises<sup>1</sup> – yet protection programming, planning and resourcing is significantly lower than other response sector approaches.

**This tendency to overlook the needs of women and girls can happen where humanitarian response teams are made up predominantly of men who speak primarily to male leaders in affected communities. To overcome it, we need to focus on increasing women's participation in surge responses to ensure we are adequately responding to the needs and rights of women and girls in emergencies.**

A recent<sup>2</sup> 'State of Surge' report providing an overview across the humanitarian sector, shows that despite some pockets of good practice, much more can be done to encourage more women to take up surge roles and ensure gender equality in international surge.

Evidence provided in the report shows that women currently represent 40% of international surge deployments, with differences in that percentage broken down further by region (e.g. 27% in Pakistan as opposed to 47% in the Philippines of project agency deployments).

In contrast, however, CARE has been maintaining a gender-balanced Rapid Response Team, and is also seeing some positive deviance in tracking global deployment statistics by gender – a flip from 43% women in 2015 to 57% in 2016. CARE has also been tracking gender against job profiles between 2013 and 2016, and while there are roles that remain dominated by one gender or the other (e.g. men in logistics, procurement, safety/security, shelter; women in gender in emergencies, communications, SRH, information management, HR) they are increasingly seeing better balance in roles that can be considered as stereotypically male such as Senior Team Leader, WASH Advisor, and Finance Manager.

In order to better understand these trends, this paper looks at some of the barriers and challenges that organisations face in increasing the number of women in surge response teams. It highlights some of the challenges women who are surged internationally face and offers some recommendations on how these can be addressed by the sector.



Photographer's Credit: Josh Estey / CARE

<sup>1</sup> IFRC report on GBV in disasters: Unseen, Unheard, 2015

<sup>2</sup> <https://startnetwork.org/news-and-blogs/state-surge-report>

## What are the barriers?

Interviews with women who have been deployed with a variety of different humanitarian agencies (including ActionAid, CARE, DFID, Islamic Relief, Save the Children and Tearfund) identified a range of barriers and concerns that fell into the following categories: personal safety and security; confidence and skills; personal hygiene (menstruation cycles and toileting); wellbeing and support; family, childcare, personal relationships; perceptions and stereotypes (roles); hostile environments (patronising or sexist behaviours) and living arrangements.

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### Personal safety and security

An overwhelming number of respondents raised personal safety and security as a key concern and felt they were at greater risk of violence than male counterparts. Some women had experiences that had informed this concern ranging from being assaulted on an aeroplane when being deployed, to not having lockable accommodation.

There was a significant awareness of the possibilities of gender based violence, and a number of respondents also raised the issue of nervousness of going into insecure environments where non-locals had been targeted previously.

Related to the issue of safety and security, one respondent raised the concern that she felt she made the entire response team on the ground more vulnerable, as having a woman in the group made the team more likely to be targeted by kidnappers.

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### Confidence and skills

Respondents felt that people working in the humanitarian sector are perceived as 'gung ho' and there is a reliance on what are normatively defined as masculine characteristics. Men are often perceived as having the confidence to 'rush in', participate in male-dominated spaces with ease and make quick decisions.

Women respondents asserted that they might not be perceived in the same light, and if this confidence is required, will either have to prove themselves in this regard in order to be taken seriously, or may self-select not to get involved in deployment roles, particularly at leadership levels.

However, some respondents did mention that multiple deployments increased both their self-confidence

and their confidence in their own transferrable skills, along with being deployed with other women, or going into teams with a good gender balance. One particular skill that came up in interview was that of language, the respondent mentioning that it is much easier to understand women survivors of disasters if you understand their language directly and are from the same culture.

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### Personal hygiene

It was noted that men have a physical advantage when it comes to long field trips with no available toilets on the route. Particularly if travelling in insecure areas, women will either have to face the indignity of urinating in front of (often male) colleagues, or 'holding on' risking contracting infection. In some cases, toilets are shared between the genders, or doors are not lockable. Women may face cultural challenges of sharing facilities, or security risks.

Menstruation came up as a very specific challenge, from being prepared enough to have sanitary products with them, periods arriving early/late due to the stress of the work, to accessing water and facilities to be able to change. One interviewee noted that having her period on deployment was 'hell on earth...'

One big issue that came up in relation to periods was the fact that they are generally not talked about in the workplace so if travelling with a group of men from a different culture, it can be a very difficult thing to deal with. One respondent noted that prior to our discussion, she had never talked about this issue at work, but only informally with friends.

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## Wellbeing and support

Most women interviewed for this study noted the importance of having support in advance of deployment from their organisations. Support on issues such as wellbeing and self-defence training, pre-departure packs that cover specific gender issues about where they are being deployed and discussions on the kinds of stress they may face on the ground (e.g. if they are directly impacted by the disaster) was deemed very important.

A number of people found that as they are surged in and less affected by the disaster, they can find themselves playing a positive support role with

in-country teams: 'Having professional wellness support from a female advisor was a useful model for me when I arrived in-country to find colleagues dealing with trauma for themselves and their families.'

Another respondent urged employers to focus more on fitness, which comes into play not only in enduring rigorous conditions and high stress, but can be empowering for women. While not having accessible wellbeing support wasn't a barrier to women deploying, most responders raised its importance in them actually being able to surge effectively.

The organisational support that they benefitted from included teams outside of the surge country (e.g. roster managers) being available to talk when they needed to; other deployees from a similar background and culture from whom they could seek personal support; and the organisation's existing pastoral support mechanisms.

## Family, childcare, personal relationships

While organisational support wasn't a major barrier to women deploying, interviewees said that the lack of a partner's support would be a significant barrier. Notably one woman said that she would not be marrying her fiancé if he wasn't supportive of her career path, and another said that without her great husband her career would be over. Such comments highlight that, while organisational support is important, there are other people in deployees' lives upon whom they also depend.

Many interviewees noted that missing out on family commitments was a difficulty posed by the surge lifestyle, but indicated that this can be compounded by family or community members who are either fearful about their working conditions, or 'judge' the fact that they work in surge – something that rarely raises eyebrows for men.

Often, women are still primary care providers, and surge roles can be especially challenging for women with children who tend to rely on their extended family for childcare support. One interviewee noted that 'no matter how helpful your partner at home, there are still some responsibilities that are not easily covered!'

Another commented that when she is deployed she is often asked who is caring for her children, as though she were likely to have left them to fend for themselves. Again, it is highly unlikely that men are ever asked this question. Another woman interviewed did not have childcare support readily available and she felt that the costs of extra childcare provision and the emotional strain that came with that decision made it too 'costly' for her to undertake surge deployment.

One respondent made some poignant points on personal/professional trade-offs, saying that while working with survivors of gender-based violence in disaster-affected communities, she remained painfully aware of having left her own daughter at home and potentially exposed to risks as well. She also noted her worries about not being more reliably present to provide role-modelling and mentorship in her daughter's life, feeling that this aspect made her absence even more difficult than it was with respect to her sons.

With regard to personal relationships, partnerships or marriage, there was agreement amongst interviewees that it is difficult for women in surge to either meet a partner ('expat men can meet someone in the field, but for expat women it's much harder') or maintain a partnership due to frequent absences.

One respondent from a polygamous culture described the societal and community pressure that led to her husband (who is quite supportive of her career choice) to take an additional wife – not to alleviate domestic burdens but rather to assert himself as head of household – when her career was in the spotlight.

Another went so far as to say 'the sector is set up to force women to choose between work and family.' A male colleague reading that line noted that he knew 'loads of female colleagues who have had to choose between career and home and kids, but virtually no male ones (including myself).' At the same time, there is a stigma in many cultures that is attached to a woman being unmarried – one respondent noted that her senior female colleague would put on a pseudo wedding ring for meetings with host government colleagues, not just to fend off potential advances, but to command greater respect.

## Perceptions and stereotypes (roles)

A few people noted that it remains more difficult for women to find opportunities in 'hard' sectors or non-traditional roles, and there is a sense that, consciously or not, agencies may still be defaulting to male leadership in the toughest contexts.

One interviewee felt that men can access greater responsibilities even when they are not qualified, and complained that whenever there was a conversation about the most stellar emergency response leaders who could 'get the job done', they were always male.

Women recognised that they can also be nervous about raising gender specific issues, for example security, maternal responsibilities or any of the barriers raised in this paper, for fear

of being perceived as 'weak' and not being offered leadership roles as a consequence. Some women also felt they constantly strive to walk a more careful line when they want to be more direct or outspoken – "men are seen as tough; but women are bitchy."

Many references were made to the frequent need for women to prove themselves, and this dynamic was exacerbated for young women, especially when working in traditional male-dominated cultures. Conversely, older women interviewed felt their age could be an advantage in engaging with both genders in local communities.

Along with age, race and ethnicity were identified by interviewees as key factors. In particular, one respondent who is a mother from the global south

and also black and Muslim, mentioned that this gave her a distinct advantage in her work with communities where she could quickly build trust. On the other hand she felt it was at the root of occasional and sometimes subtle resistance to her leadership role and ability to influence when it came to some international colleagues.

One ethnic Asian participant noted that middle-eastern people were frequently surprised to learn that she was not a domestic worker, but cited this as being far less offensive than situations experienced by her African colleague who was regularly harassed as a presumed sex-worker. One white British respondent was aware that she is perceived as 'that young, white, girl' and therefore not taken seriously.

## Hostile environment (patronising or sexist behaviours)

Interviewees were divided in their opinions about the continued existence of a 'boys' club' in humanitarian work. While some did not reference this dynamic at all, others acknowledged that they were aware of it from time to time but generally untroubled by it. Most respondents mentioned experiences with male colleagues who were condescending in their treatment of female colleagues.

Some men that interviewees encountered made it clear they thought it was alright to make sexist comments, jokes or innuendo and roll their eyes at any reference to gender awareness training (and when one interviewee called them out on the behaviour, they accused her of being humourless and emotional).

Another woman noted that while in the field she was told '...watch that

guy - the moment a woman starts speaking, he falls asleep.' Another respondent advised 'not letting people's dismissiveness get to you' as important for a woman's resilience. The same woman shared a story of being patted on the head by a man in a meeting, and when sharing that story with others more than once received the response 'I bet you were upset that he didn't pat you on the bum'.

## Living arrangements

Women on deployment are often thrown together with men in housing arrangements. This can lead, at best, to some awkwardness, and at worst, stigmatization of the woman in the eyes of the host community. "You don't want to stay alone and miss the camaraderie of your team, but you also don't want to raise eyebrows. Even when we feel it's unreasonable, we need to think about the cultural labelling that may be prevalent."

However, one respondent noted that she was the only woman living in a house full of supportive and collegial males and had found it a very positive experience, giving her increased mobility (through a 'buddy system' of going out for meals etc) and a greater sense of security.

Other issues raised about shared accommodation related to sharing of domestic tasks, where there can be an

expectation that women will take the burden of cooking, washing up and cleaning. One respondent who was sharing accommodation with a few men noted that none of them had ever learned to cook prior to being deployed.



Photographer's Credit: ActionAid

## What good practice do we know of?

While the sector has a long way to go, there are some good practice examples from different agencies that we can learn from.

Women's leadership is at the heart of ActionAid's humanitarian signature and embedded in all their humanitarian approaches. With specific reference to surge, ActionAid actively encourages women to apply to their surge roster and in 2016 updated their surge policy to reflect this. The agency found that many women were not applying to the roster due to (mainly child) caring duties in the home, and responded by changing the policy to include an additional 48 hours available prior to deployment for those with caregiving responsibilities to make arrangements.

Staff members who have to make additional paid care arrangements so that they may be deployed will be entitled to claim a financial contribution towards this. People with caregiving responsibilities will be given priority for shorter deployments of less than 4 weeks or for non-rapid deployments (e.g. evaluations). Carers on deployment for more than one month will be entitled to request leave during the deployment if they wish to return home.

While the intent of the policy was to ensure more women would apply to the roster, it is not only applicable to women but also to men who are primary caregivers. ActionAid hopes that over time, as more men make use of the policy they will start to challenge the perception that women are, and always will be, the primary carers.

In the case of CARE, the greater involvement of women in surge has come about through practice and policy.

A strong programmatic focus on gender equality and women's empowerment serves as a foundation that has seen the organisation increasingly determined to 'walk the talk' and systematically look at the way they operate through a 'gender lens'.

CARE has many specific policy guidelines related to gender in emergencies, along with a series of strong supportive tools that are consistently used at all levels, including in recruitment practices. This in turn has led to increased presence of GiE and GBV/Protection experts – 97% of whom are female – whose influence has grown significantly on both the humanitarian and development sides of the agency's programs.

Because of awareness raising across the organization, managers approach staff issues with a greater degree of understanding and commitment to gender equality in all aspects of work – and this is particularly true in the case of key surge staff managers, according to most of the CARE staff interviewed.

CARE believes that their programmatic mandate + organizational culture + sensitive surge management approaches have combined powerfully to account for the shift in gender balance on deployments in recent years.

Islamic Relief recognises the vital role women play in surge and is actively encouraging women to become involved through the introduction

of a more transparent, flexible, internal roster recruitment process. The agency's new roster guidelines stipulate a minimum deployment period of 3 weeks, and a maximum period of 3 months but have included flexibility in the system to ensure that, should a suitably skilled female become shortlisted for deployment, her needs would be discussed and deployment planned accordingly.

The agency's HR department operates a 'Gender Inclusion' Working Group which focuses on what measures the organisation can introduce in order to support female employees achieve their aim of being deployed in the field. The Gender Inclusion Working Group meets on a regular basis. It acknowledges and works towards mitigating the constraints and barriers that have been reported by women working on emergency response.

In certain contexts, Islamic Relief maintains separate hostels for female staff on emergency response which encourages more women undertake deployment. The organisation recognises that it is necessary to adapt to cultural contexts and to consider personal preferences; it's not a case of one size fits all.

A number of the organisations, including Save the Children, address security of staff by providing country/cultural and safety/security briefings ahead of arrival or within the first 24 hours (depending on locations).

# What solutions can be discussed in humanitarian agencies to support more women in surge roles?

Overall, the authors of this paper recommend that humanitarian agencies' surge policies and practice should specifically address supporting women in surge. Agencies should also ensure that their gender and diversity policies are updated and discussed with staff on a regular basis. There should be equal representation of women in leadership and management of surge systems and in deployment teams.

Photographer's Credit: © Gyril le Tourneur d'Ison / CARE



## 1. Personal safety and security

**Strong safety and security measures** are paramount for women. More effective, institutionalized **briefings**, both pre-departure and on arrival, are key. Briefings need to include more **specific reference to gender related safety and security** such as harassment common in local culture as well as Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

Ideally, briefings for women would be **led by women** to enable a comfort level to discuss specific women's issues that might be a concern for the deployee. Briefings need to be followed with systematic processes to ensure ongoing security and support. This could be something as simple as a buddy system that permits greater mobility for women, and/or the appointment of a female 'focal point' in the field – someone who is sufficiently senior and empathetic to hear women's concerns.

Humanitarian agencies should also **review the accommodation** that they expect deployed staff to stay in, and if there are safety concerns (and specifically, women-defined concerns) ensure that they are mitigating these as effectively as possible, and contracting staff on **agreed behaviours** while in that accommodation.



## 2. Confidence and skills

Humanitarian agencies should invest in **surge training** for all staff (there is a package of surge training agreed by 13 agencies in the Transforming Surge Capacity project<sup>3</sup>). This will help staff to think through their capacity gaps, and where they have less confidence that could be built through ongoing learning programmes.

For humanitarian agencies putting together a deployment team, it is critical that the **gender balance of the team** being deployed is considered. Where there is a good gender balance, women are more able to demonstrate their confidence and skills than if they are the only woman being deployed with a group of men. Role models are crucial, as it was frequently noted that strong **women leaders** in the sector can

break stereotypes as well as inspire and create space for others to follow.

**Management support and sensitivity** is key in recognizing that women don't always put themselves forward confidently for assignments – sometimes they need to be reminded with feedback and performance management that they are capable of stepping a little outside of their comfort zone as well.

## 3. Personal hygiene

The most critical thing that this study can advise in relation to menstrual hygiene is to encourage all humanitarian organisations to create **safe spaces for women and men** to talk about periods and toilet access.

Men must be sensitised to the needs of women so that women don't feel they have to be 'allowed' a toilet break and/or privacy. There is a need for women to be able to be open about having periods and how they might need regular toilet access during that time.

## 4. Wellbeing and support

This area is of overwhelming importance. **Peer support** can make a huge difference in challenging times. Respondents cited the existence of informal networks as a 'lifesaver' when times were tough on deployment.

Where reasonable, humanitarian organisations should deploy **more than one woman** from similar cultures/contexts so that they can provide each other with ongoing support. Having **women in leadership roles** in the field and in deployment roles creates an enabling culture and environment for wellbeing and confidence.

The humanitarian agency plays a critical role in supporting women while they are on deployment. Of note respondents wanted to know there was **support outside of the deployment country** that could be relied on. This is an important role for deployment managers or HR professionals.

In addition, ensuring that all surge staff are **trained on wellbeing** is critical, not only to be able to manage their own stress levels and concerns, but as they also play an important role supporting others while they are on deployment.

Most significantly, management approaches were cited as a key factor in retention, motivation and trust – many women confirmed that being able to openly express concerns and receive empathetic support and flexibility in return was their main reason for staying in a surge role.

<sup>3</sup> <https://start-network.box.com/s/gqfrwuiyvhuvezh805hm5gd4lo0ltranj>



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## 5. Family, childcare, personal relationships

Humanitarian agencies should invest in **policies and procedures** that enable staff to have a good **work/life balance**. These policies and procedures should either be specifically aimed at staff that have to undertake rapid deployments or more generic policies amended to take account of rapid deployments.

These policies should **make allowance for childcare costs, and family responsibilities**.

Agencies that do make allowances for childcare should ensure that all staff are aware of the policies and can draw on these without having to feel as though they are making

a special request. The majority of deployments take longer than the standard 6–48 hours to arrange with travel arrangements and visas, so being more open to timeframes for deployment and ensuring caregivers have time to make adequate arrangements is important.

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## 6. Perceptions, stereotypes and hostile environments (patronising or sexist behaviours)

Organizational culture plays a significant role. CARE and ActionAid have gender equity and/or feminist approaches embedded into their working cultures, though a power analysis of ActionAid and anecdotal evidence from CARE have highlighted a lingering culture of a 'boys club' that still affects some leadership contexts. It's important for humanitarian agencies to name and discuss the hidden and invisible power

structures of their organisations, so that they can be discussed and challenged where necessary.

There need to be safe spaces where women can voice and discuss their experiences of gender related discrimination in the workplace, and effective ways that they can challenge this safely within the organisation. In relation specifically to surge, encouraging safe spaces on

deployment for women to discuss and address discrimination issues they face is important.

To encourage women to be able to challenge policy implementation, and hostile environments, humanitarian agencies should actively promote women into leadership roles within their agencies, including roles where they are surged regularly.

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## 7. Living arrangements

Where possible and safe, separate accommodation should be arranged for men and women. Where this is not possible, agreements should be made as part of standard operating procedures on sharing domestic responsibilities.

Cultural awareness and sensitivity should be employed when arranging accommodation both on the part of the host community, but also on the part of the people being deployed.

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