The Lessons from cases at “The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami”

The Preparation Stage

The Lesson: Preparation by local women ensures quick response
Prompted by local officials in Sendai, women of all ages living in the city’s Iwakiri neighborhood began to meet in 2010, sharing opinions and developing plans for disaster response from a women’s perspective. Discussions among the group’s 20 members led to the “Iwakiri Women’s Disaster Preparedness Proclamation,” which urged women to plan their response in advance in order to react quickly to a disaster.

Issued only months before the 3/11 quake that struck Sendai and the surrounding Tohoku region, the proclamation is credited with heightening local awareness at a critical time, thereby helping to ensure quick and orderly evacuation. What’s more, group members played important roles in ensuring that the special needs of women, children and seniors were met by local evacuation shelters.
The Disaster Assistance Stage

The Lesson: Pre-planned childcare frees first responders
When disaster strikes, critical first responders must be able to drop everything and rush to the scene. That’s why each base of Japan’s Ground Self Defense Forces (GSDF) has facilities and procedures ready on short notice to receive the children of personnel called suddenly to disaster zones.

Hours after the 3/11 earthquake, temporary childcare facilities were opened at 19 GSDF bases. Thanks to quick care for 1,138 children, 931 personnel were ready for immediate dispatch to the affected areas. This greatly enhanced the GSDF’s response readiness, especially among female personnel with children.
The Lesson: Creating safe space to help women evacuees

When tens of thousands were forced to evacuate, a convention center in Koriyama served as shelter to more than 2,500 people. With so many people crammed in a facility that was itself damaged, conditions became extremely disorderly, particularly for women.

In April, three groups – prefectural officials, a local gender equality center and a local women’s group – came together to provide support to women in this chaotic environment. Women-only areas were set up and supervised, creating a venue for volunteer groups to provide a variety of services, including a coffee corner, meeting spaces, massages and more. A help desk offered information and legal advice and distributed security devices.

By creating safe and orderly space amid chaos this initiative allowed volunteers to provide effective assistance to women in the massive shelter.
The Lesson: Healthcare NGOs collaborate on shelter visits
Sankaku Planning Iwate, an NGO in the area stricken by the 3/11 quake and tsunami, was already serving women suffering from domestic violence and other problems when disaster struck. So the group was well-situated to set up the “Women’s Mental Care Hotline Iwate,” and began operations two months after the disaster.

Working with the Iwate branch of the Japan Midwives Association (with which they had a prior relationship), the NGO also began regular visits to women in evacuation shelters. The ostensible purpose was routine checks of things like blood pressure, but the underlying agenda was to lend a sympathetic ear and listen for hidden problems. It was relatively easy for the midwives to make contact with the evacuees, as they had assisted with some evacuees’ childbirths and had developed existing relationships.

One lesson from this experience is that networks formed in normal times can provide the basis for effective response after a disaster.

The Lesson: Local women make competent, caring managers
After the nuclear accident at the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the population of Iitate, Fukushima Pref., was evacuated on April 22, 2011 – many of them to communities close by. In addition to nine temporary housing facilities, people were also directed to public accommodations, rental housing, etc.

After calls were issued for women who had exhibited leadership or performed conspicuous service in the community, seven women in their 50s and 60s were hired to manage the temporary housing facilities. Their main tasks included receiving new residents; arranging the distribution of provisions; confirming the safety of residents; making frequent visits to shut-in seniors; and so on. After organizing an autonomous committee, the managers worked with residents to operate the temporary facilities.
The Lesson: Give residents a voice in running temporary housing

Following the 3/11 disaster, temporary community-care-style housing facilities were built in Kamaishi, Iwate Pref., based on proposals from the University of Tokyo's Institute of Gerontology.

The community-oriented design enables residents to naturally interact with their surroundings. It is barrier-free and features a living environment with shopping facilities, work areas and social welfare spaces, plus transportation to nearby towns, and more.

Residents have been given a voice in day-to-day operations, by way of autonomous committees comprised of resident-directors who serve for six months. The first directors were all men, but by the third term, four out of fourteen were women. As two of these were mothers with children, the committee developed a better understanding of family needs.

An all-inclusive system of participation was developed to avoid dividing the community into caretakers and care recipients. Residents who were not on the committee still found roles actively helping out at events, so that they not only received support, but supported others as well. There was an energetic promotion of female gender sensitivity in the operations of these committees.
The Lesson: Special support for men

Men often react to trauma and the frustration of life in emergency housing by drowning their sorrows in drink. This can lead to depression, alienation and, too often, to suicide or death from other causes.

The “Ohashi Men’s Club” was set up in tsunamistricken Ishinomaki in July, 2012 to address such problems among men in temporary housing. Calling it a “men’s club” was key as few would have gone to a “health workshop aimed at reducing alcohol dependence,” which is what it was meant to be.

Club activities, decided in consultation with the participants, included cooking and exercise classes as well as courses on health: oral hygiene, checking blood pressure, measuring body weight, etc.

A total of eight sessions were held with the number of participants growing throughout the program, which was supported by local government, the nursing association and visiting support workers. Support workers from outside led the planning, but the actual operation grew to include staff (for promoting healthy dietary habits) and volunteers from among the residents.
The Recovery and Reconstruction Stage

The Lesson: Giving women a voice in reconstruction

Jusanhama is a fishing village on the coast of Miyagi Prefecture that was destroyed by the 3/11 tsunami. After the disaster, it was decided to rebuild on safer ground, and discussions began toward forming a consensus among village residents. So in October, seven months after the tsunami, a coalition of volunteers — including academics, NPOs and the Architectural Association of Japan — traveled to Jusanhama to hold workshop-style events and exchange views with residents.

By tradition in a village like this, all major decisions are made by the local patriarchs — so that was what people were expecting. But having studied similar reconstruction efforts, officials from the local municipality — Kitakami Ward of Ishinomaki City — recognized the importance of giving women a voice. So they held a women-only meeting in November.

Out of the shadow of the local men, the women spoke frankly of their anxieties over the move to higher ground and their fears about the cost of it all. Gradually, their familiarity with the surroundings and everyday family needs led them to provide very detailed criteria for reconstruction — things like how sidewalks should be gently inclined to make them accessible to seniors.