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Introduction

In the humanitarian context, gender mediates access to aid. The gender of the beneficiary is not only intrinsically linked with her/his disaster vulnerability (Enarson, 2002), but also to their ability to physically access aid distribution points (Lutz and Gady, 2004) and even to be considered a beneficiary in the first place. There is, however, yet another factor mitigating an individual’s access to aid: namely the humanitarian organization and its workers (Kovács and Tatham, 2009).

Particularly in the case of purchasing within humanitarian organizations, it is both the mainstreaming of gender among purchasers and as well as the use of the purchasing function itself to empower women that deserve attention. In relation to the latter, humanitarian organizations have frequently adopted a strategy aimed at increasing the income, skills and influence of women in local communities by purchasing from them (UNOPS, 2010). In case of former, the gender of the purchaser has been linked to the quality of decision-making in, for example, deciding what products to buy and distribute to beneficiaries (Min et al., 1995). In particular, the gender of the decision maker affects their awareness of gender specific needs, and there is ample evidence of the wrong items being bought and of the needs of female beneficiaries not being considered sufficiently well in purchasing decisions. Examples of such failings include the provision of tents for refugee/IDP camps made of transparent materials that made it possible to detect females who were alone and, thus, exposed them to sexual violence; or the absence of hygiene items for females. Purchasing decisions are, thus, linked to the safety and hygiene, health and wellbeing the beneficiaries.

Gender is, therefore, an important aspect that purchasers in the humanitarian context need to consider - and yet it is an area of current practice that has frequently been overlooked. However, this is less surprising when one considers the gender ratios of purchasing decision-
makers which, in the humanitarian context, can range from 70:30 up to 90:10 male to female. Thus, although gender mainstreaming is undoubtedly on the agenda of many humanitarian organizations, there is clear evidence that this strategic aim yet to be implemented in the area of purchasing. The aim of this research is, therefore, to improve the situation of beneficiaries through diverse and more gender-aware purchasing decisions.

**Gender in purchasing**

Research on gender in purchasing has followed the career patterns of women (e.g. through the annual Ohio State survey that is distributed to CSCMP members, see Cooper *et al.*, 2010 for the most recent edition) and, more importantly, recognized the paucity of women in the profession. This has led to a number of programs with the overall aim of increasing the number of women employed in the purchasing filed (as well as in the broader area of logistics and supply chain management). For example, the Canadian government initiated a program for “Women in Logistics” (WIL) in 2008, and established a task force under the umbrella of the Logistics Institute. WIL UK is, by comparison, a non-for-profit organization that supports the networking of women (mostly through their ‘LinkedIn’ group which is one of many targeting women in this field) and is endorsed by a number of important professional organizations in the UK. Similarly, the “Women Moving Forward” (WMF) program is supported by the Australian Logistics Council and other peak bodies. To date, over 430 women representing over 200 companies have taken part in the mentoring program of WMF which is specifically targeting the retention and development of women within the transport and logistics industry.

There is even a group - the Women’s Institute for Supply-Chain Excellence (WISE) – that is dedicated to supporting female humanitarians working within the broad area of supply chain management. By the same token, universities have invested conscious efforts to attract women to the profession, through mentoring programs such as in the former Empathy Net-Works Project of the University of Hull, and establishing positions dedicated to women including the prestigious Lise Meitner professorship at the Faculty of Engineering at Lund University. The fact that this is currently held by one of the authors of this research who has recently been appointed as a professor of supply chain management is testimony to the increasing awareness of the implications of the lack of females in this key business field.
There is, therefore, some cautious grounds for optimism that this increased focus may, over time, lead to an increase in the number of females entering and remaining in the profession. Unfortunately, however, its image remains determinedly male (Sohal and D’Netto, 2004; EP, 2007) – particularly in the humanitarian context. Some even talk about the truck drive image of the profession, which is partly reflected in the way that vacancy notifications tend to focus on functional and technical skills in the humanitarian context in contrast to the general management skills found in the business environment (cf. Tatham et al., 2010). The hardships and physical/mental/security challenges of the profession are also greatly emphasized in such job advertisements. But, whilst recognizing that such challenges do unquestionably exist, a recent booklet published by WISE contains a number of reflections written by female humanitarians and these helpfully underline the positive aspects of being female in this field (Steele, 2010).

Whether gender has an impact (positive or negative) on purchasing has been disputed for a long time, with only limited research on which to draw. Unfortunately, such research as does exist is inconclusive. On the one hand, for example, Min et al. (1993) considered the role of gender in purchasing negotiations and came to the conclusion that women perform better on this task. However, when Kovács and Tatham (2010) investigated this in a survey, not only was gender not deemed to be a significant factor for performance, but negotiation skills were not seen as “female”. That said, the very same respondents (n=174) who regarded gender to be an insignificant factor, volunteered a total of 79 stories in which they indicated a positive (40) or negative (39) impact of the gender of the humanitarian on performance overall. This is surprising not only given their overall assessment in the same survey, but also the that there were so many responses to an open-ended question would end to indicate that gender is actually a matter of some importance.

**Purchasing within the humanitarian context**

Purchasing or procurement decisions should be understood as embracing all decisions related to the challenge of obtaining access to resources, capabilities and knowledge of external actors in the supply chain that are required by the organization and obtained through transactions (c.f. purchasing definition in Van Weele, 2010). Such decisions start with the decision to buy a resource needed but not owned, and are followed by the determination of the relevant specifications (what to buy, how much and in what quality and specifications), market analysis and selection of suppliers (who to buy from), negotiating and contracting (the
terms of the purchase), to the operational decisions to order (e.g. when to buy), evaluation of the delivered goods/service, and follow up (for example, process improvement) (Van Weele, 2010).

Research has suggested that ensuring an effective purchasing can contribute to better returns, e.g. “up to 4% of sales value or 30% to profitability” (Thompson, 1996: 6). However, the applicability of such claims to the humanitarian context has yet to be research as, to date, there has been limited research in this field (Shahadat, 2003); whilst at the same time, there are additional complexities inherent in purchasing for humanitarian operations. For example, purchasing of health related products such as pharmaceuticals, vaccines, and contraceptives has proven to be a growing challenge, especially for developing nations (DeRoeck et al., 2006; Ellis, 2011).

Among the main challenges in purchasing within humanitarian are the limited funding and resources, lack of demand transparency, and limited knowledge by purchasers (based on UNICEF data, 2010). One reoccurring theme within the reports from the field, whether dealing with longer term development projects or with disaster relief situations, is the lack of clear understanding about the demand. This usually results in a push strategy, where several goods (purchased or in-kind donations) are fast-tracked to the country of destination before an analysis of the actual need has been undertaken or completed. Such needs assessment (or specification) is recognized as the first step within the purchasing process (Van Weele, 2010) and, hence, the driver of the need to purchase. In other words, firms or organizations must first decide what to purchase, in what quantity and quality, before they begin to structure the purchase approach of whom from, and how to purchase.

In practice, given the complexities attached to information gathering from the field driven by, for example, poor or disrupted physical and/or communications infrastructure, language and cultural complexities and nuances, and even the existence of physical danger from a variety of sources, it is not surprising that needs assessment is a key issue. Both longer-term development projects, as well as disaster relief projects, introduce specific constraints that increase uncertainty and knowledge about the demand. For example, in case of health related products, Taylor and Yadav (2011) note that the nature of diseases present in a disaster situation is connected to factors that include weather, social, educational and economic state of livelihood. This, unsurprisingly, results in high demand uncertainty and, this is exacerbated
by the fact that the disease incidence, transmission intensity, peak amplitudes and lengths of the disease season, and food yield and famine can all vary significantly in different time periods.

**How can gender mainstreaming contribute to purchasing in the humanitarian context**

In addition to the needs assessment challenges outline above, a further important issue is that of gaining access to, and information on, the differential needs of the population cohorts. For example, in some cultures it is not acceptable for women to work outside of the household or to speak with un-related men. As a result, the needs of this significant population may not be reflected in the assessments conducted by humanitarian organizations. “*In emergency situations the nutritional and health needs of women, including their reproductive and sexual health needs, and of pregnant and nursing mothers and their infants are often overlooked or neglected*” (McAskie, 1999). An example is the specific prenatal medication required for mothers, or even clothing types for women may not be captured by the needs assessment process – especially if the assessor (i.e. the humanitarian worker) is male.

Having women within the purchasing team of the humanitarian organizations can help gain a better understanding of the potential and actual requirements of those women who have been affected by the disaster or emergency. Although, it should also be recognized that, that, based on the information contained on the relevant UN webpage, “*some UN humanitarian agencies such as WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF have already made progress in developing gender-sensitive programming and policies. The same applies for some NGOs such as OXFAM and CARE*” (McAskie, 1999).

**Some case examples**

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During the Chad Emergency, there was a need for sanitary towels to be distributed to women refugees in the camp. However discussions on the appropriate improvised sanitary towel went round in circles for about three months. During this time, women in the camp of reproductive age did not stop menstruating to allow the matter to be resolved. The logisticians involved did not comprehend what the alternative options were apart from the manufactured product they may have been familiar with back in a modern society.

(Source: WISE, 2009:6)
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The second was a case from the 2004 Tsunami. This was where a male logistician received a purchase request to supply the programme with women’s underwear to be distributed to those affected in Banda Aceh. This gentleman forgot that women (and even men) come in different sizes. He placed an order for one size and in one color. Eventually the one-sized underwear had to be returned. This caused a delay in distribution and additional costs.

(Source: WISE, 2009:6)

Summary

The challenge of achieving appropriate and equitable purchasing in the preparation for, and aftermath of, a natural disaster or a complex emergency is multi-faceted and is currently one that is only achieving limited success. This is not to say that disaster response agencies are unaware of its importance; rather that their efforts have yet to deliver significant improvements on the ground. With this in mind, it is suggested that a key step will be to increase the number of females directly involved in the purchasing process within the field (and, indeed, within the area of humanitarian logistics and supply chain management more generally). This would not only improve the breadth of advice available, but may also help overcome some of the concerns of the beneficiary community who have been beset by a disaster, and at the same time have their cultural norms challenged by the presence of (typically non-indigenous) male aid workers who, with the best will in the world, will struggle to comprehend and respond in an appropriate way.

References


