Pakistan: Involving women in reconstruction
Pakistan’s double whammy of floods in 2010 and 2011 left millions of people homeless and destitute.

IOM responded with the One Room Shelter (ORS) programme which has provided 22,600 living spaces units to almost 160,000 especially vulnerable people, including women heads of household and their families.

IOM provided technical training and USD 300 in cash to each beneficiary family, totaling USD 6.7 million distributed through village focal points to buy construction materials.
IOM promoted seven traditional shelter types. Each featured disaster resistant improvements on traditional low-cost mud shelters (so-called “katcha houses”). The construction methods for the improved shelters were compiled into a construction manual produced by a local organization for heritage conservation. The manual was the key technical guide for implementing the programme, which intends to assist 22,900 families in reconstructing their own shelters with minimum external input. Local control allowed better use resources and supported economic recovery. The programme organized more than 11,637 training sessions in 1,000 villages, which covered 273,547 attendants, including 80,820 women.
Building a one room shelter takes a minimum of six months since slower construction produces sturdier shelters that withstand the elements. Houses made with the cobb-mud process grow 1.5ft every 3 days to allow the mud to dry and settle before adding another layer. With male family members working in the fields, women usually shoulder this task. When the courtyard mud layer placed over natural soil dries, it acts as a hard surface slab. Once in place, it is easier to clean, provides space for household chores, reduces the spread of dust and provides a safer area for children and toddlers. Overall, the new shelter designs allow for the construction of safer homes, and significantly reduces the environmental impact of reconstruction by relying on local adobe bricks. Fired bricks production involves more pollution, deforestation and bound labor.
By strengthening foundations, walls and roofs, villagers built units that are rain and flood-resistant. Foundations were reinforced by using lime, sand, stone or brick crush. For the shelters’ walls, sand, mud, lime, straw and cow dung were used in cob or adobe brick forms. Beneficiaries constructed roofs using bamboo, plastic sheets, straw mats, lime and sand to boost weather- and load-resistance. The improved katcha houses use natural, abundant and locally sourced materials (such as mud, bamboo and straw mats).
The ORS programme promotes traditional mud construction. The versatility of the material allows women to easily improve their shelters by adding not only decoration features but also storage space directly into the walls. Cash transfers to households allow for the customization of reconstructed buildings and support local income-generating activities and markets. The ORS programme trainings taught beneficiaries the importance of maintenance and small repairs as a way to extend shelters’ lifetime.
The ORS programme also aims to reduce migration by supporting communities to build safer and stronger shelters that can withstand impacts in case of natural disasters. IOM proposed three main improvements: lighter roofs, raised platforms and thicker walls. The program was designed to consider geographical and cultural differences. It offered families the opportunity to choose from seven traditional shelter models reengineered by IOM to include Disaster Risk Reduction improvements.
The ORS programme gave women the opportunity to paint their shelters, allowing them to express their creativity and put their own stamp on their new homes. Their new houses provide women with more privacy, security and confidence in the future which they express through colorful and cheerful drawings. In this house a shelf was added to the walls to guarantee that household and kitchen items are safer from water damage. It also adds a decorative touch to the inside of the house. Friendly competitions among local women to come up with the most elaborate designs help to personalize the new homes.
Women have used the construction process to recreate warm and inviting spaces where they can pursue traditional activities and livelihood opportunities such as the famous Sindh patchwork quilting. The quilts are traditionally used by villagers as bed covers and blankets. Women work together to produce and sell them to generate income.
Beneficiaries are encouraged to manage their grant efficiently. Some have made savings that allowed them to acquire other assets. This family was able to buy a sewing machine to generate a complementary livelihood through local embroidering craftsmanship.
IOM provided much needed water pump systems in 60 selected villages. It prioritized those villages in which women had to travel long distances daily to collect potable water, meaning they can spend more time at home with their families or engaged in income-generating activities.
By promoting self-reconstruction and targeting support to the most vulnerable households, IOM helped communities to grow more resilient. It is encouraging that IOM already has witnessed the ability of these shelters to withstand recent heavy rains. Between August 2012 and September 2013 more than 22,600 shelters have been constructed. Building on the success of the programme, IOM is further extending its activities to the Northern part of the Sindh province where construction of 11,400 more shelters has already started.
Nur Khatoon, a 60 year-old widow benefited from the IOM programme and here’s what she said:

My old house, made of wood and mud, collapsed completely during the torrential rains which continued for a few days. I hardly managed to salvage a few personal belongings and was forced to live on the side of the road.

After a few weeks, men from other displaced families went to surrounding cities to look for work but since I had absolutely no means of earning, I decided to move back to my village. The project teams approached me after some time and registered me in their shelter programme.

I’m uneducated and didn’t know about construction or the banking system, so I was worried about how this would work out. However, I was reassured when a village committee was formed and a focal person was elected to receive the cash payments on our behalf. The village committee gave me a sense of belonging and together we have been able to solve our problems and achieve our construction milestones.

Technical trainings were conducted in my village and I participated and learnt how to construct my shelter. We make our material purchases together and for an old person like me who cannot travel to the city to buy the materials, this has been a blessing!
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