

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Non-food items (NFIs) and the needs of women and girls in emergencies

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## Question

*What non-food items (NFIs) best meet the (basic and protection) needs of women and girls in emergency situations? Include beneficiary and expert feedback where available.*

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## 1. Overview

Emergencies disrupt daily life and often cause the displacement of populations, with the loss of many of their possessions. In such situations humanitarian organisations step in to provide the basic necessities of life and restore people's dignity. However, during these emergencies women and girls face a number of differing needs, threats, and situations which need to be considered in any response. Part of the response includes the provision of various non-food items (NFIs). This rapid review seeks to draw upon studies, lessons learnt, evaluations, and expert and beneficiary feedback to establish what NFIs best meet the basic and protection needs of women and girls in emergency situations.

The literature uncovered by this rapid review suggests that there is not a strong evidence base which addresses this question. Much more attention has been paid to the NFIs required to address the menstrual hygiene needs of women and girls than to their protection or other basic needs. The majority of the literature is grey literature published by organisations active in this area rather than peer-reviewed academic literature (see also Sommer, 2012, p. 89). The existing literature uncovered by this review and expert contributors agrees on the importance of providing NFIs that meet the basic and protection needs

of women and girls, especially in relation to menstrual hygiene management. There is little information about why women and girls' needs are often still being neglected in the provision of NFIs. In addition, there are gaps in the literature when it comes to the 'views of beneficiaries on the usefulness of the kits and materials distributed and what their ongoing needs may be in differing contexts' (Sommer, 2012, p. 99; expert comments).

The NFIs which best meet the basic and protection needs of women and girls in emergencies are best **identified in consultation** with affected women and girls. This helps to ensure that the items selected are **culturally appropriate** and suitable to use in that context. The specific NFI needs of **elderly women, disabled women, pregnant and chronically ill women** should also be considered. Gender-sensitive NFIs help restore women and girl's **dignity** and enable them to be more **mobile and protected**. Receiving NFIs means it is less likely women and girls will engage in transactional sex in order to raise money to buy them. Unfortunately gender-sensitive items are **not yet systematically included** in NFI packages.

The NFIs which best meet the basic needs of women and girls in emergencies include:

- **Hygiene/dignity kits:** women and adolescent girls require locally appropriate sanitary items to manage their menstrual hygiene. These may be reusable cloth or disposable sanitary pads. The opportunities for privately washing, drying, and disposing of sanitary cloths or reusable pads need to be considered.
- **Suitable clothing:** women and girls require culturally appropriate underwear and clothing.
- **Household items:** items for cooking and bedding are important for meeting basic needs.
- **Contraception:** the need for contraception does not go away in emergencies, especially as the risks surrounding pregnancy and child birth increase due to the collapse of natal and neo-natal care.

The NFIs which best meet the protection needs of women and girls in emergencies include:

- **Torches, radios and whistles:** torches help light up areas where women are at risk of attack; radios help keep them informed of developments in the crisis; and whistles can attract attention if they need help.
- **Firewood/energy saving stoves:** women risk attack when collecting firewood, so energy saving stoves would lessen their exposure to risk.

**Gender-sensitive logisticians** are more aware of the importance of the needs of women and girls and thus are more likely to procure and provide appropriate NFIs. NFIs need to be **distributed** in ways that ensure they are safely received by all the women and girls who need them.

## 2. NFIs and the basic needs of women and girls in emergencies

Meeting the basic needs of women and girls in emergencies, and ensuring their dignity, requires an understanding of what constitutes dignity in each context and in relation to the cultural and religious practices of each community (expert comment). The most important thing to do is discuss women and girls' needs with them (expert comment; Gomez, 2006, p. 6). The guidelines for the UNFPA's dignity kit clearly state that the 'appropriate items should be identified in consultation with affected women and girls'

(Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10). As a result the contents of kits can vary across countries<sup>1</sup>. It is important to realise that women and girls are not a homogenous group. The NFI needs of elderly women, disabled women, pregnant and chronically ill women should also be considered (IASC, 2006, p. 90).

As well as ensuring dignity and the freedom to participate in daily life, taking a gender-sensitive approach to the provision of NFIs could ‘mitigate and even prevent acute illnesses, morbidity, pain and suffering, as well as long-term healthcare costs among female post-disaster populations’ (expert comment). NFIs which meet women’s basic needs include: hygiene/dignity kits including sanitary items; suitable clothing; household items; contraception; and shampoo, soap, hairbrush/combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste.

## Hygiene/dignity kits

Hygiene or dignity kits that include **sanitary items** have been flagged up by the literature and experts as an important non-food item, which meets the basic needs of women and girls of reproductive age in emergency situations (Sommer, 2012, p. 95; IASC, 2005, p. 61; Gomez, 2006; de la Puente Forte, 2013, p. 7; Mazzacurati, 2013; expert comments). Dignity kits may contain ‘a small container with lid for soaking cloth and washing underwear, some form of cloth or pads, soap, underwear, a veil (where appropriate) and whistle and a wind up torch. Some also include a washing line’ (expert comment). Dignity kits usually contain more items than hygiene kits, as they are explicitly tailored to the needs of women and girls with the aim of respecting the women’s rights, values and beliefs (Mazzacurati, 2013. p. 2).

The sanitary items provided need to be appropriate to the **local context** and what women are used to (Mazzacurati, 2013; expert comments). In some situations this may be complicated by refugee camps that are home to refugees from a number of different countries and who have different ideas of what is appropriate (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 144). Appropriate sanitary items may be reusable cloth or disposable sanitary pads. Reusable sanitary cloths should be provided in a dark colour (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10). UNICEF’s Supply Division is considering a range of products that might meet menstrual hygiene management needs in emergencies, including ‘commercially produced sanitary napkins, cloth towels, a collection of locally produced and sustainable pads (including ones produced by Afripads, Makapads, Padback and SHE), and even a menstrual cup’ (Sommer et al, 2012, p. 32).

The appropriateness of the sanitary items provided is also dependent on the **opportunities for washing** cloths/re-useable pads (e.g. access to water, privacy, and adequate space for drying of used materials, etc.) (expert comment; Sommer et al, 2012, p. 31). In addition, it is important to include soap and water for washing the blood off the sanitary items, hands and clothes (expert comments). One expert suggests that it would be good to include a small plastic washing basin for this specific purpose as women are often reluctant to wash their used sanitary items in the same washing basin that is used for general laundry and washing dishes (expert comment).

The **needs of adolescent girls** who are about to start menstruating, or have already started, should also be considered. A study by UNICEF in the DRC found that adolescent girls had insufficient sanitary protection (Brun and Michel, 2009). Often they need adequate menstrual hygiene management guidance and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in Myanmar kits contained ‘sanitary napkins, hand soap, detergent, underwear, hairbrush/comb’, while in Syria they contained ‘sanitary napkins (1 pack of 10), t-shirt and underwear male (2 – size L and XL), camisole and underwear female (2 – size M and L), washing powder in plastic bag, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, antiseptic hands soap, disposable razors (1 pack of 5), shaving cream, one face and hand towel 100% cotton, nail clipper, hair brush, hand sanitizing gel, socks, under scarf (1 set of 2 pieces: 1 tube shape and 1 round head and neck cover, white colour), UNFPA bag (textile, 100% waterproof) (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 25-27). More examples are available in Annex 1 of the UNFPA’s Dignity Kit Programming Guidelines (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 25-27)

information, as well as the sanitary items themselves, so they are aware of the changes in their bodies (expert comment; Sommer et al, 2012, p. 28).

One expert also raised the issue of whether **pain killers** are being provided for women with severe menstrual cramps (expert comment).

In Myanmar, after Cyclone Nargis, one expert found that receiving dignity kits made women **feel respected** as they felt their needs were prioritised (expert comment). This was also a finding of evaluations looking at the impact of the UNFPA's dignity kits and UNICEF's work on menstrual hygiene management in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Abbott et al, 2011, p. 6; Brun and Michel, 2009). Being provided with sanitary items also means that women do not have to make difficult decisions about what to spend their limited money on (expert comment; Abbott et al, 2011, p. 6; CARE Kenya, 2012, p. 6).

Dignity kits mean that women are able to be **more mobile** and thus access services, gather water and firewood and engage in livelihood activities (expert comments). A study by UNICEF in the Democratic Republic of Congo found that a lack of sanitary items meant that women tended to avoid leaving the camp and thus could not engage in livelihood activities. This had a negative impact on their economic and social life (Brun and Michel, 2009). Adequate sanitary items mean that girls are able to **attend school** during menstruation (expert comments). The study by UNICEF found that shame and discomfort as a result of an inadequate number of sanitary items were reasons that some girls were reluctant to go to school (Brun and Michel, 2009). It is important that enough sanitary items are provided as women and girls need time to wash and dry them before reuse or they risk discomfort and gynaecological complications (Brun and Michel, 2009). UNHCR specifies 'either disposable napkins (12 per person per month) or reusable, absorbent cotton material (two metres long per person per six months), and six underpants per person per year' (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 139).

### ***Providing for the use and disposal of sanitary items***

As well as being provided with NFIs such as underwear and sanitary items, women and girls need to be provided with 'access to safe, private and clean water and sanitation facilities so that they can manage their menses privately and without fear of attack en route or while in the facility' (expert comment; Sommer et al, 2012, p. 32). Another thing to consider is the provision of 'private spaces for drying menstrual cloths (which often come laden with many taboos if seen by someone else) and for disposal (with cultural differences on whether materials should be burned, buried, etc)' (expert comments; see also House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p.146-149 for appropriate washing facilities).

Disposal of these NFIs must be considered when deciding on which sanitary items to provide (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10; expert comment). Latrines are 'strongly affected by disposal of used pads', while 'solid waste disposal is also often problematic in emergency contexts' (expert comment).

### ***Gaps in the provision of hygiene/dignity kits***

Despite the clear need for adequate sanitary cloth/pads to meet the needs of women and girls in emergencies there are many cases where they are still not being provided (expert comment; CARE Kenya). For example, a CARE project to address the hygiene and protection needs of women in the Dadaab refugee camps was set up in response to the lack of provision of such items by other agencies (CARE Kenya, 2012). The most recent report from the IASC Reference Group on Gender and Humanitarian Action also highlights the extremely limited distribution of dignity kits and sanitary material for women and girls in response to the emergency in South Sudan (IASC, 2014, p. 2; expert comment). A recent Women's Refugee Commission

report looking at the Syrian crisis found that women weren't being consulted about NFIs, and hygiene kits were not initially provided to women or their distribution had stopped (Zaatari, 2014, p. 9; Krause et al, 2013, p. 2).

Where hygiene kits are being provided there are reports that they are often **inconsistently provided, inadequate** or provided in insufficient qualities (expert comment). One expert remarks that 'the need for culturally-appropriate sanitary materials is a constant refrain in all humanitarian responses and an area that we continually fail/fall short on' (expert comment). Sanitary items provided without underwear, as some organisations do, make them harder for women and girls to use (Sommer, 2012, p. 92). Providing sanitary cloths without considering the need for women and girls to wash and dry them privately can also mean that sanitary provisions are inadequate (Sommer, 2012, p. 92). An evaluation after the 2006 earthquake in Pakistan suggests that 'both underwear and sanitary towels should have been packaged separately in the family hygiene kits' (UNICEF, 2007, p.2). Deciding on appropriate sanitary items should not delay their distribution, as women will continue to menstruate whether or not they are provided with the appropriate items. For example, during the Chad emergency it took logisticians three months to decide on which sanitary items they would provide (WISE, 2010, p. 6).

Experts suggest that more **information** needs to be provided to women about the purpose of the sanitary items they are provided with, especially if they are not familiar with them (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 144; Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10; UNICEF, 2007, p. 2; expert comments). For example, one expert noticed that a woman was using a sanitary napkin as a cover for her mouth (expert comment); while in other places girls were unnecessarily reusing disposable pads (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 144). Women-only distributions of hygiene items could help ensure that the purpose of the sanitary pads/cloths and any related items could be explained to women at the point of distribution without any embarrassment (expert comment).

Some suggest that sanitary items could be produced locally in order to provide women with livelihood opportunities (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 144; Sommer, 2012, p. 92). This could also improve efforts to sustain the supply of sanitary items (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 141). UNFPA's dignity kits already frequently consist of locally procured items (Sommer, 2012, p. 92). Another suggestion is that cash or vouchers be provided to women to buy their own underwear and sanitary items, which would enhance their dignity and ensure appropriateness (UNICEF, 2007, p. 4).

### ***Providing for those with differing needs***

Wateraid's training module on menstrual hygiene highlights that providers of sanitary items need to consider those with 'specific needs, such as girls or women with disabilities or menstrual disorders, those who have had the most severe forms of female genital mutilation or cutting, with additional challenges such as incontinence or fistula, and post-natal mothers' (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 132). The focus on women of reproductive age can mean that 'younger menstruating adolescent girls and older women with delayed menopause are frequently overlooked' (Sommer, 2012, p. 96). A report by the Inter-agency Working Group (IAWG) on Reproductive Health in Crises on Syrian refugees in Jordan found some elderly or disabled people's need for adult diapers had not been met (Krause et al, 2013, p. 2).

### **Suitable clothing**

Appropriate underwear and clothing is important for meeting the needs of women and girls in emergencies (Gomez, 2006, p. 7; expert comments). This clothing should be **culturally appropriate**. For example, female Syrian refugees have requested the inclusion of headscarves in their 'women's emergency kits' (expert

comment). The UNFPA provide headscarves and sarongs in some Muslim contexts to improve the mobility of women, as without them they cannot be seen in public and access essential services (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 2). In Africa, women are provided with wrap skirts (Abbott et al, 2011, p. 3). In Myanmar, feedback from Muslim beneficiaries indicated that headscarves are important for girls so that they can attend Madrasa school (de la Puente Forte, 2013, p. 7). This kind of provision was key to these beneficiaries, as they had only one change of clothing (de la Puente Forte, 2013, p. 7). The dignity kit provided to women and girls by the Emergency Shelter/NFI Cluster in Somalia recognises the importance of appropriate clothing, for example, by including dresses (*dirac*); shawls (*garbasar*); underwear of different sizes; petticoats (*gorgorat*); and headscarves (*shash*), as well as sanitary cloths and soap (Emergency Shelter/NFI Cluster Somalia, 2011).

Inappropriate **underwear** has been provided to women in some emergencies. For example, G-strings and underwear with skulls and crossbones on the front were provided to women in Haiti after the earthquake (expert comment). In other instances, such as after the tsunami in Aceh, women were provided with clothing but not with underwear, which they also needed (UNICEF, 2007, p. 2). It is important that underwear is provided in all sizes (expert comment; UNICEF, 2007, p. 2).

## Household items

Household items such as plates, spoons, cooking pots, cups, knives, forks, buckets and jerry cans for cooking and household use; as well as blankets, sleeping mats, mattresses, beds, mosquito nets and plastic sheets for protection and bedding purposes are also important in meeting the basic needs of women and girls (expert comments). One expert suggests that for Somali female refugees in Dadaab refugee camps these items are very important because in this context household management is seen as a women's responsibility (CARE Kenya). Therefore the loss of these items during their displacement adds to women's burdens when they reach their place of refuge (CARE Kenya). The importance of these items can be missed if women are not consulted, as an example from consultations in a refugee camp by the ICRC shows. According to men food was deemed the priority, yet for the women, the cooking pots, utensils, water and firewood needed to cook the food were considered to be more important (Lindsey-Curtet, Holst-Roness and Anderson, 2004, p. 53). As women are often responsible for collecting water, jerry cans should not be too large or heavy for women or girls to carry (Lindsey-Curtet, Holst-Roness and Anderson, 2004, p. 58).

## Contraception

A number of experts raise the need for condoms and other contraceptive measures in emergencies (expert comments). The need for contraception does not go away in emergencies but with the collapse of natal and neo-natal care during emergencies, the number of women who encounter difficulties if they fall pregnant increases (expert comment). Guidelines produced by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development also list contraceptives amongst the items which emergency relief supplies should include (Gomez 2006, p. 7). A group of Syrian refugee women mentioned that they were too shy to ask a doctor for condoms and would prefer for them to be provided without having to ask (Krause et al, 2013, p. 5). Condoms were provided in the dignity kits supplied by UNFPA in Ecuador, Côte d'Ivoire, Jordan, and Nepal (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 21, 25, 26).

## Shampoo, soap, hairbrush/combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste

Shampoo, soap, hairbrushes/combs toothbrushes and toothpaste are also mentioned as being important for meeting women and girls' basic needs, and women in various countries have requested their inclusion in their dignity kits (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10; expert comment).

## Pregnant women and new mothers

There are a number of additional NFIs pregnant women and new mothers need. These include breast and bottle feeding supplies (expert comment), suitable clothing (Sphere Standards, 2011, p. 231), clean delivery kits (expert comment), and diapers (Zaatari, 2014, p. 9). In countries where it gets cold, it is important to provide new mothers with caps for their babies to reduce cold-related deaths (expert comment).

## 3. NFIs and the protection needs of women and girls in emergencies

Many of the items which meet women and girl's basic needs also fulfil their protection needs (expert comments). The appropriate clothing in, for example, Somalia is important for women to maintain their dignity and respect (Emergency Shelter/NFI Cluster Somalia, 2011). Women and girls may feel like they cannot properly protect themselves if their dignity is compromised by the lack of adequate sanitary items, which can mean, for example, that their clothing has menses stains (Brun and Michel, 2009).

Women and girls are also protected by not having to engage in transactional sex in order to raise money to buy NFIs which meet their basic needs (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012, p. 131; expert comment). Additional items that meet their protection needs include: torches, whistles, radios; firewood and energy saving stoves; and additional tarpaulin.

### Torches, whistles and radios

Torches, whistles and radios have been mentioned in the literature and by experts as being important in meeting the protection needs of women and girls (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 2; expert comments). Focus group discussions with Syrian women and through the IFRC BenComms (beneficiary communications) initiative in the Philippines, revealed that women valued handheld (crank or solar-panel) radios, solar lamps - both handheld and fixed - and, in the case of Syrian refugee women, whistles (expert comment). They used the radio to keep in touch with relevant updates in the crisis; the lamps could be carried to communal latrines and wash areas where women were vulnerable to attack in the dark; and whistles were used to call for help if a women (or child) was or felt they were in danger (expert comment). Another expert mentions that after Typhoon Haiyan solar lanterns with mobile phone chargers helped women to stay safe, especially while traveling at night (expert comment). CARE Kenya provided solar lamps to vulnerable female refugees in order to 'improve their security and reduce their vulnerability' (CARE Kenya, 2012, p. 3).

From their experience working in the field, World Missions Possible recommend that solar powered torches are pink, as this means that men were unlikely to want to use/steal them (expert comment). Solar powered torches and radios are better than battery powered ones, as batteries run out quickly (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 10).

### Gaps in the provision of protection NFIs

As with dignity/hygiene kits, other gender-sensitive items such as torches, whistles, and radios are not systematically included in NFI packages (expert comments). One expert attributes this to the lack of input by affected women in programming decisions (expert comment). This means that for those in charge of funding these items are perhaps seen as secondary and are therefore cut (expert comment).

## **Firewood and energy saving stoves**

Access to fuel for cooking is a problem for women and girls, as they are often attacked when they search for wood beyond the camp (expert comments). One expert suggests that providing clean cook stoves and cooking fuel would reduce the risk of rape and exploitation when collecting firewood, as well as reducing respiratory diseases (expert comment). Beneficiaries in Myanmar also mentioned firewood as a priority, as they feared leaving their camps to collect wood because of the risk of attacks (de la Puente Forte, 2013, p. 8). Providing energy saving stoves would reduce the amount of fuel required and thus women's exposure to attacks as they would have fewer journeys to make (IASC, 2005, p. 58-59).

## **Tarpaulin**

Experience from the Philippines and the Syrian crisis indicates that additional tarpaulin can help meet the protection needs of women and girls in emergencies by providing them with privacy and protection (expert comment).

## **4. Additional issues to consider around NFIs and the needs of women and girls in emergencies**

As well as providing women and girls with gender-sensitive NFIs there are a number of additional issues to consider in relation to their procurement, distribution and disposal. These factor into which NFIs best meet the basic and protection needs of women and girls in emergencies.

### **Lack of gender-sensitive logisticians**

The lack of gender-sensitive and female logisticians is suggested by some of the experts as a factor in the failure to procure and provide NFIs that are appropriate for the needs of women and girls (expert comments). One expert provides an example of a male logistician in Haiti procuring the G-string underwear mentioned above for distribution amongst women in need after the earthquake (expert comment). Another suggests that the often male disaster planners feel that addressing menstruation, re-useable sanitary items, and breastfeeding is a medical issue or that they are 'too "squeamish"' to address these women's needs (expert comment). Elsewhere, there have been situations where male logisticians have handed out one sanitary napkin at a time, which is both inconvenient and embarrassing for the women involved (Stelle and Kovács, 2013). Having men hand out underwear and bras and ask women about their size can be very inappropriate and uncomfortable for women in a number of cultures (Steele and Kovács, 2013; Gomez, 2006, p. 12). Women may also feel reluctant to approach men for their personal hygiene requirements (Gomez, 2006, p. 12). One expert flags up the need for gender-sensitivity training for logisticians and for more female logisticians so those choosing and supplying NFIs are aware of the importance of the needs of women and girls in emergencies (expert comment).

### **Distribution of NFIs**

The literature and experts flag up the importance of making sure that NFIs are distributed in a way that ensures that female members of households have equal access to them (expert comment). It is important to provide enough bedding and blankets, for example, to allow for girls and boys to sleep separately (expert comment); or to prevent mothers from giving up their mattresses to their children, which occurred in post-tsunami Aceh (Gomez, 2006, p. 5). The UNFPA dignity kit guidelines also suggest it is advisable to include extra items as women often share the contents of their kit with their families (Mazzacurati, 2013, p. 11). It

is important to also register second wives and their children in polygamous families for NFIs (expert comment). The IASC Gender Handbook also emphasises the importance of not designing NFI provision with assumptions about family size and structure (IASC, 2006, p. 89).

In addition, the way in which NFIs are distributed needs to consider the protection needs of women and girls. A Women's Refugee Commission report looking at Syrian refugees found that women reported being 'sexually harassed by passers-by or being humiliated by comments referring to the lack of a "man" who can take care of their needs' when collecting their NFIs (Zaatari, 2014, p. 9). As a result, some organisations have turned to home deliveries to ensure that women receive the required NFIs and that they have a choice in what they receive (Zaatari, 2014, p. 9).

If distribution times are during school hours, girls may be disadvantaged. The UNICEF report found that many girls who needed sanitary items missed out on receiving hygiene kits because they were in school at the time of distribution (Brun and Michel, 2009).

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