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Michelle Daniela Pazmiño Vásquez (second from right), national UN Volunteer Protection Officer with IOM, and Johana Garcia (third from right), national UN Volunteer Officer for the promotion of a life free of violence with UN Women, conduct a session on soap making as part of an entrepreneurship workshop for women. (Juan Diego Pérez Arias/UNV, 2016)

Women as agents of change after a natural disaster

After the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that hit Ecuador in April 2016, affecting the lives of around 720,000 people and with almost 30,000 people having to seek refuge in temporary camps, UNV mobilized 24 UN Volunteers to support the emergency response in the affected areas of the country. Of these, 11 were deployed with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and four with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to prevent gender-based violence and ensure their participation in the humanitarian response to the disaster.

Following the earthquake, the situation of women and girls was of special concern because they are more likely to become victims of violence and discrimination in a humanitarian emergency. Displacement, over-crowded camps, lack of privacy and lighting, limited and unsegregated wash facilities increase the risks.

Before the earthquake, [Jasmine Blessing](#) (Germany) worked as an

international UN Volunteer Public Policy Specialist at the UN Women country office in Quito. After the earthquake struck, her responsibilities changed.

She started to work on a pilot project that aimed to increase women's participation in camp governance. "Camps are very male-dominated places, where women are often excluded from decision-making in response strategies that affect their ability and that of their community to recover from crisis," Jasmine points out.

“ I interviewed local women residing in the shelters, and was shocked to learn how deeply gender roles still prevail in the camps.

The next step was to design small projects aimed at changing traditional gender roles and improving women's participation, which led to women engaging in non-traditional activities such as cash-for-work initiatives and the removal of debris.

[Michelle Pazmiño](#), national UN Volunteer Protection Officer with IOM, promoted the participation of women and adolescents in decision-making processes, and organized mentoring and entrepreneurship activities that allowed women and their families to improve their living conditions.

"I helped organize workshops on income-generating activities for women that allowed them to return to some sort of normality after the earthquake," Michelle says. "These, as well as recreational activities fostering interaction and participation, empowered women and girls to get involved and have a say in decisions affecting life in the camps."

María Eugenia Parra, national UN Volunteer Training and Economic Empowerment Specialist with UN Women, organized construction courses for women. "It was very satisfying to see that, after taking the courses, ten women started working at construction sites". María Eugenia also helped coordinate a capacity-building workshop on gender for around 80 male construction workers, in preparation for the arrival of the female builders starting their jobs at the site.

Jasmine Blessing is happy that her assignment as a UN Volunteer allowed

her to work with the population directly affected by the earthquake. “My experience in Ecuador taught me that natural disasters can change household dynamics and promote opportunities for women as agents of change,” she concludes. “Gender stereotypes can and have changed over time. They change fast in emergencies, and this is a challenge and an opportunity to build a more equal society.”

Apart from the 15 UN Volunteers who served with [UN Women](#) and [IOM](#), another seven were deployed with the [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) and one with the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) in the areas affected by the earthquake.

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 5: Gender equality](#)