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PAKISTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Kitchens Build Community

Communal kitchens in relief camps help cultivate friendships among women



Photo: Save the Children/Murad Say

Women teach each other how to build better cooking stoves. The mud stoves designed in one village offer better protection from flames and more fuel-efficient cooking practices.

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Mehra Tent Camp is temporarily home to 16,000 people displaced by the devastating October 2005 earthquake. In normal times, women and girls are responsible for tending livestock and small plots of land, especially in families where men have migrated to cities for work. Women in the region do not traditionally interact with many people outside their own family. But at Mehra Camp, women have suddenly found themselves surrounded by thousands of unrelated people, including military personnel and foreign aid workers. One result of the new, unfamiliar living situation is that men began to care for livestock and perform other outdoor chores while women were largely confined to their tents. Women began cooking inside their tents, exacerbating already problematic respiratory problems among the population and especially children.

USAID responded by sponsoring a program to build 41 community kitchens. The kitchens are simple, partially enclosed tin-walled structures which enable safer cooking practices. The communal kitchens also provide a place for women to socialize with each other and share news and information. Women who use the kitchens say they spend an average of five hours a day there. “Before the kitchen, we had no time to talk because we were busy in our tents. Now we are happy because we can talk while we work,” said one woman who uses a communal kitchen frequently.

As the kitchens were being built, some of the women said that they would like to be able to cook on mud stoves, like those used in the villages. They identified a woman in the camp who is known as an expert in building mud stoves. The woman trained five other women in mud stove-making, and these trainees then began constructing traditional mud stoves in their community kitchens.

Women say the community kitchens are a place where they can feel at ease. The community kitchens have contributed to both the mental and physical wellbeing of women at the Mehra Tent Camp.