

Why Are There So Few Female Humanitarian Logisticians?

This apparently simple question was recently posed by Pamela O'Honde, (the President of the Women's Institute for Supply-Chain Excellence In International Humanitarian Logistics – www.wise.uk.net) and Martijn Blansjaar (WISE Chief advisor) in a meeting with two members of the HUMLOG Research Network – a group of nine Universities and other Institutions working in the broad area of Humanitarian Logistics – www.humloggroup.org).

Given that the aim of HUMLOG is:

“To research the area of humanitarian logistics in disaster preparedness, response and recovery with the intention of influencing future activities in a way that will provide measurable benefit to persons requiring assistance.”

responding to the question was a challenge readily accepted by two of the Research Group's founders: Dr Gyöngyi Kovács from HANKEN (the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration in Helsinki) and Peter Tatham from Cranfield University in UK.

Following their initial scoping study, Gyöngyi and Peter have developed a three phase research plan, the first of which is already well under way. This involves, firstly, a review of the published literature covering a number of key facets of the question:

- What makes a good humanitarian logistician?
 - Whilst there have been quite a few studies discussing this general question from the perspective of business and commerce, one cannot assume that the skills, personal qualities and experience that make up “good” from a business perspective will migrate across to the humanitarian domain.
- How does gender relate to the skills and qualities identified above?
 - To date, there have been few studies on gender issues in logistics. Yet, a recent survey indicates that there are significant differences between female and male leadership styles in logistics. Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that the gender of the logistician has an impact on decisions made for different

customer segments, i.e. different groups of beneficiaries in humanitarian logistics.

- What are operational issues that could be improved by the increased presence of female humanitarian logisticians?
 - The element of the literature review is aimed at understanding how the paucity of female logisticians has had an adverse effect on areas such as Needs Assessment, Local Purchasing and The Last Mile.

The second phase, that will run in parallel with the first, is aimed at understanding the views of those within the humanitarian community of the “what does good look like?” question (Bullet 1, above). It is planned that the results of these first two phases will be presented both at academic conferences (in June & July 2008, and the annual Humanitarian Logistics Conference arranged by the Fritz Institute (www.fritzinstitute.org) in May 2008.

The final phase will take the results of the desk-based research described above and conduct a series of field interviews to help to confirm (or to contradict) the theoretical perspective that has been developed. The results of the complete study will also be presented to both academic and practitioner audiences.