



THE GENDERED IMPACTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS: A FOCUS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters have become increasingly common and intense in recent years due to human activity and climate change, with significant consequences. Women and children are especially vulnerable during and after natural disasters, with long-term physical, emotional, and psychological impacts. While climate change research has been ongoing for a long time, climate change has socio-economic repercussions and has impacted the ecosystem. While individual case studies are important, additional comparative studies that analyse the similarities and differences in natural disaster consequences across different locations and cultures are needed. The paper looks at how gendered the effects of natural disasters are, with a focus on the disproportionate burden on women and children. Due to climate change, several natural hazards will change in frequency, severity, timing, and location making the children and women in poor and developing countries more vulnerable and at risk.

KEYWORDS: natural disasters, climate change, environmental factors, natural hazards, droughts, floods.

INTRODUCTION

The perception that all individuals within a population face similar impacts during disasters is often inaccurate. Natural disasters exhibit a non-neutral nature, impacting women, men, girls, and boys disparately due to existing gender inequalities stemming from socio-economic circumstances, cultural beliefs, and entrenched traditional practices frequently intensified by marginalisation attributed to various factors such as age, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. These factors consistently place females at a disadvantage, resulting in differentiated and often more severe consequences for them during disasters. The intersectionality of these multiple dimensions further amplifies the vulnerability of certain groups, particularly women, to heightened risk and adverse impacts from natural disasters (GFDRR, 2018).

The article looks at an important aspect of disasters: the gendered dimension of disaster liability as demonstrated by gender-specific disaster mortality. The difference in the impact of natural disasters on female versus male life expectancy is not a physiological or biological gender gap but also a distinct socially constructed vulnerabilities resulting from either the social roles men and women undertake, whether they choose to or not, as well as decades of prejudice against women (Neumayer and Plumper 2007).

Pre-existing disparities in gender structures lead to distinct impacts of disasters on women and girls compared to boys and men. Women and girls, especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, face heightened vulnerability during disasters, particularly evident in regions of the Global South or low-income countries. This increased vulnerability

significantly affects preparedness, evacuation procedures, response efforts, mortality rates, and rehabilitation post-disaster. The underlying causes of this vulnerability often stem from the societal roles assigned to women and girls, coupled with prevalent gender and cultural norms within their communities. These norms encompass the specific responsibilities, attire, expected behaviours, and duties imposed on women and girls, contributing to their heightened vulnerability during disasters (Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In situations where disasters strike communities controlled by power dynamics established on gender, age, or socio-economic class, the effects of such calamities are likely to mirror these pre-existing discrimination and patterns. As a result, an individual's encounters with disaster will likely be distinct. It is widely acknowledged that a gender perspective is imperative during times of crisis and disaster, given the diverse impacts that men and women experience and the varied coping mechanisms they employ. The concept of vulnerability considers individuals and their differences; in other words, it increases knowledge of the social condition by confirming that individual circumstances change and can be altered, such as by a disaster. As a result, the notion examines the resources available across different social strata to describe their current place in society (vulnerability as a passive term) instead of the prospects of changing the situation (vulnerability as an active concept) (Bradshaw, 2004).

Many theories, such as intersectionality theory, can be understood here while discussing gendered implications in disaster situations. Intersectionality has also been utilized for



gender and economic equality for women who have to surpass discrimination other than gender only. Recognizing the constraints of theorizing gender as a single collective transcending race and class, intersectionality encourages scholars to include a broader group of women, which includes women from different backgrounds, in their gender analyses. (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008).

Regarding identifying the reason why women are more vulnerable to disasters, the intersectionality theory, which critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) propagated in the 1980s, plays an important role in understanding how not just gender but many other multiple reasons are at play. According to this theory, social categories like gender, race, and class interact to create unique experiences of privilege and discrimination. In the context of natural disasters, intersectionality theory implies that women and children from marginalized groups may be more vulnerable and have fewer assets to deal with the disaster's repercussions (Crenshaw, 1991). Adopting an intersectional approach to investigate the gendered effects of natural disasters can help uncover how many forms of discrimination interplay and aggregate to enhance vulnerabilities (Enarson and Morrow, 1998).

Moving along the same lines of thought, another theoretical perspective that can be utilised to understand the gendered phenomenon in a disaster is feminist political ecology, which emphasises the significance of recognising the gendered components of environmental challenges. In the context of natural disasters, feminist political ecology suggests that women are frequently responsible for managing natural resources such as water and food and maybe disproportionately affected when a disaster disrupts these resources, as we further understand the patriarchal system in which men and children have first access to resources such as food and water makes it more difficult for women to get proper rehabilitation (Rocheleau et al., 1996).

To address natural disasters, the need for human, financial, physical, natural and social capital for risk management is crucial (Bahera 2021). It is further explained by the social capital theory, which contends that social networks and relationships are essential resources for disaster management. In the wake of a natural disaster, social capital theory predicts that women and children with strong social networks may be better able to obtain financial and emotional assistance to rehabilitate (Partelow S. 2021). Finally, we look into environmental justice, a theoretical concept that emphasises how marginalised people are frequently disproportionately impacted by environmental risks due to characteristics such as race, class, and location (Bullard, R. 2005).

¹ In certain disaster scenarios, a notable discrepancy in mortality rates between women and men has been observed. Studies indicate that in disasters such as Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami in Banda Aceh, and Cyclone Gorky in Bangladesh in 1991, a higher percentage of fatalities were women, reaching 61%, 70%, and 91%, respectively. However, in instances

Environmental Justice is a complex, multidimensional, and continually evolving concept. It recognises the equal distribution of harm and benefits of environmental disasters. For example, environmental hazards such as pollution tend to be disproportionately located in low-income communities, minorities or politically disadvantaged communities. These groups would face the legacy pollution caused by earlier generations and rich people (Bass, 1998). Environmental Justice typically centres around three overarching objectives: firstly, ensuring fairness in the allocation of environmental risks; secondly, acknowledging and valuing the various perspectives and diverse experiences within impacted communities; and finally, facilitating active participation in the political mechanisms responsible for formulating and overseeing environmental policies (Bass, 1998).

Using an environmental justice perspective, studying natural disasters can highlight how systemic inequalities can produce and aggravate vulnerability. Some of these systematic inequalities are explored in the following sections. It focuses on the human impacts of natural disasters, particularly the vulnerability of women and children, and how the long-term consequences will be comprehended. Some immediate and main effects of disaster-related human impacts, particularly on women and children are studied. Physical well-being, health impacts, displacements and loss of livelihoods, sexual violation and exploitation are some of the disaster-related issues explored.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Women are at risk for physical harm during natural disasters due to factors such as increased caregiving responsibilities and lack of access to healthcare (Shakya D. R. 2016). Gender inequality in all areas of society increases women's vulnerability to catastrophe risk, affecting community resilience overall. To address the repercussions of inequality, first, one must identify the specific needs and where gaps may exist. Disasters have an adverse economic effect on everyone, but women are disproportionately affected. According to a World Bank study, female who works as farmers are largely more vulnerable to disasters than male farmers¹. Due to limited access to information about incoming disasters and fewer resources to prepare or respond effectively being a primary caregiver might hinder escaping a disaster. This lack of knowledge access might make them more vulnerable during a disaster. As many women's primary source of income, disruption to this can be disastrous. Many people, such as women, do not have the protection of bank accounts to secure their savings when a crisis strikes (Okai, 2022).

One important data gap in disaster death studies is the existence of more gender categories than merely distinguishing between women/girls and men/boys. Women die as a result of societal

where economic and social rights are more evenly distributed between genders, research suggests that death rates tend to show less disparity. For instance, following Hurricane Katrina, there was a minimal difference between female and male mortality rates, with age emerging as a more significant contributing factor (Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, 2022).



roles, such as wearing specific clothing during a disaster, which caused many women to die due to physical restraints when evacuating. At the same time, another example is women dying in Indonesia while waiting for their husbands to return from fishing in the coastal area. These mortality tolls reveal little about the overall vulnerability of different sexes or genders. These result from varied societal responsibilities encapsulating broader and deeper concerns about unaddressed disaster threats. There are some more examples of how societal roles become an obstacle in surviving a sudden disaster. Women must commonly wear clothing that impedes fast mobility while care responsibilities hinder responses. They would never wear less or alternate apparel for convenience, and they would never forsake the children or older people for whom they are responsible. Meanwhile, men frequently want to take on greater responsibility for caregiving, but they are discouraged as being unmasculine (Kelman, 2023).

HEALTH IMPACTS

Natural disasters can have a variety of health consequences, including injuries, illnesses, hunger, and mental health issues. Women and children are especially vulnerable to these health consequences, especially if they lack access to healthcare and sanitation (Djalante et al., 2015). As mentioned in the previous section, societal duties make a woman's status more vulnerable in a disaster. Further investigation reveals that women and children are at a higher risk of starvation and disease during and after natural disasters. Research conducted following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti discovered that children were at a higher likelihood of becoming malnourished due to food supply interruptions, while women were at a higher risk of reproductive health problems because of less access to healthcare (Rudowitz et al., 2006). These circumstances can aggravate the psychological discomfort experienced by women and children. Women, as we all know, are in a disadvantaged and vulnerable position in society. Thus, trauma and emotional distress can lead to difficult rehabilitation. Natural disasters can result in severe mental distress, such as trauma, anxiety, and depression. Women and children are especially exposed to these psychological effects, which can have long-term consequences for their well-being because adolescents are still maturing (Shakya D. R. 2016).

When it comes to women, the psychological well-being is more complicated. Women may also face longer-term psychological effects from natural disasters. Numerous research on the impact of natural disasters on women will show how dire the situation is. A study conducted in the United States discovered that women who were affected by Hurricane Katrina suffered higher rates of post-disaster psychological distress than men and that these effects lasted for up to three years after the disaster. (Shooshtari, S., et al, 2018). These impacts have psychosocial effects on women and children, with women and children experiencing anxiety and depression and most women feeling stressed and powerless (Dube, A., 2018).

The absence of adequate support services and the presence of social stigma often result in women coping silently and independently with enduring psychosocial consequences following natural disasters. It can lead to social exclusion and disruptions within families. Similarly, the lack of necessary support for men can manifest in violence, frustration, and depression, further worsening abusive behaviours and contributing to the exclusion and marginalisation of women within communities. This interconnected cycle highlights how the absence of support for both genders can perpetuate negative outcomes, impacting both men's and women's well-being and social dynamics post-disaster (GFDRR, 2018).

DISPLACEMENT AND LOSS OF LIVELIHOODS

Women and children are frequently compelled to escape their homes during natural disasters, becoming internally displaced or refugees. Displacement can lead to the loss of livelihoods and the disintegration of social networks, resulting in economic and psychological hardship (Shultz et al., 2016). Disasters, as experienced by people in poverty, poorer, and with lower incomes, suffer more in times of natural disaster, and we know that women are the lowest income group in any society. Moreover, with the loss of male members or families, women's position during a disaster may be worse, so women experience more risk and feel more threatened by both natural and manmade disasters. This finding may be related to the fact that some rehabilitation is expensive, maybe too expensive for individuals, especially women in poverty, to pay, for example, purchasing materials to rebuild houses, and a lack of resources and access to property inducing hardships on women and children (SAMHSA, 2017).

A study after Hurricane Katrina found that women and children accounted for more displaced people who had difficulty accessing temporary housing (Rhodes, 2010). Finally, the loss of a home after a disaster can lead to additional distress, such as disrupting access to education, particularly for girls who may be forced to drop out owing to family responsibilities or safety concerns. It can have long-term implications for their educational and economic prospects (Anderson, 2009). Safety might concern vulnerable women living in camps and shelter houses. A crisis may appear to be a scenario in which everyone suffers. Gender discrimination, on the other hand, can aggravate the hazards for women and girls. For example, they will likely have fewer skills and resources to repair destroyed homes and livelihoods. Loss of shelter can put individuals at risk of gender-based violence. Girls dropping out of school might be vulnerable to sexual violation, or marrying too young may increase. These adolescent girls are at risk of becoming child brides in the camps, married off before the age of 18. More camp awareness is needed to avoid child marriage, which can be accomplished by working with families to keep girls in school and not drop out (UN Women, 2017).

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Women and children are at a higher risk of sexual violence² and exploitation during and after natural disasters. There are

² Following a disaster, there's often a notable lag in reporting incidents of sexual violence, attributable to various factors. Victims tend to

prioritize basic recovery needs over-reporting due to the immediate necessity for survival. Moreover, the limited availability or complete



numerous reasons why solely women and children are victims of sexual abuse during such crises, including a lack of protection as a result of the situation and displacement owing to homelessness. It was discovered during a thorough analysis of the 2015 Nepal earthquake (Chaudhary P et al. 2017). These are the primary reasons why, as described in the previous section, women and children have a greater case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than men (Musa, R. 2014). Similarly, gender-based violence and inequities and crimes like prostitution and human trafficking, early marriage or forced marriage, and so on take place in such a situation, while men may resort to violence as a result of a collapse in social norms, law and order breakdown and support systems (Enarson, 2012).

Gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, affects men and boys as well. There has not been much research on GBV against males, and hardly any in disaster circumstances. Given the special challenges that men and boys confront in confessing that they have been victims of GBV, it necessitates extra attention and caution. Domestic violence was the most common kind of violence in nations where GBV was documented, and most respondents claimed it had been common long before the disaster. Marital tension aggravated by stress brought on by the loss of family and friends, livelihoods, and houses; insufficient resources; and infidelity and promiscuity as a result of constrained life in internally displaced person (IDP) camps were identified as reasons for this. The investigations also appeared to indicate that single women who reside in temporary shelters are particularly vulnerable to abuse of these kinds (IFRC, 2015).

These impacts are not limited to one specific region or disaster; they are global and affect vulnerable populations worldwide. Addressing these impacts requires a comprehensive approach that includes disaster risk reduction, social protection, gender mainstreaming, and promoting human rights to properly reduce such hardships and problems (United Nations, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Gender inequality during natural disasters is still a major concern in present times. The impacts on women in the aftermath of a disaster disproportionately damage women and girls due to gendered power imbalances and discriminatory social practices (Oxfam International, 2019). Moreover, as of now, the problem persists despite the efforts of several international organisations to address it through various means. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and management measures are needed to protect against gendered discrimination. Research shows that women and girls are frequently excluded from disaster preparedness and response decision-making processes due to the perception of weaker gender (UNDP, 2019).

Gender inequalities in disaster response and recovery activities are made worse by discriminatory societal norms and power

imbalances. Women in disaster-affected areas confront significant challenges in terms of caregiving, reproductive health, and livelihood. As a result, more gender-sensitive disaster response and recovery methods that recognise and address the unique issues women and girls encounter are crucial. Furthermore, ensuring women's participation in disaster preparedness and response decision-making processes is important to obtaining equal outcomes. Gender inequality during natural disasters must be addressed as a first step towards developing more resilient and sustainable communities.

Children are substantially affected during disasters, and they are the most vulnerable group in the world, in addition to the gendered effects. Disasters can result in physical harm, separation from parents, displacement from homes, and emotional anguish, all of which can have long-term consequences for the mental health of children. Education can also be disrupted by disasters, which can lead to child labour, child marriage, and child trafficking. Child-centred disaster risk reduction and management solutions that prioritise their safety, well-being, and rights are required to address the consequences of natural disasters on children. These approaches should consider the specific needs of different age groups, such as infants, toddlers, school-aged children, and adolescents. Furthermore, ensuring that impacted children have access to school, healthcare, and psychosocial assistance is critical in minimizing disasters' long-term effects. To sum up, these studies indicate that gendered discrimination and significant impacts on children during natural disasters remain a permanent issue, and there is a need for more gender-sensitive disaster response and recovery efforts.

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sexual violence incidents during and after disasters (Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, 2022).



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