



GENDERED LANDSCAPE OF DISASTER: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Repeated disasters threaten sustainable development. Disasters destroy decades of human efforts and investments towards development, thereby placing heavy demands on society for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Disasters—both natural and human-made—pose substantial risks to societies globally. History has shown that societies sustain annual losses due to the impact of natural and anthropogenic hazards on unnaturally created vulnerable circumstances. Women and men differ in their vulnerability to disasters. Women and children (both boys and girls) are 14 times more likely than men to die in disasters. Gender disparities exert powerful differences within societies worldwide, even in the field of disasters. Gender mainstreaming in disaster reduction allows women to decrease their vulnerability through identifying their specific needs.

Promoting the active participation of women in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery is not just a matter of equity—it is essential for creating resilient, adaptive, and safer communities. Their inclusion leads to more broad, receptive and effective disaster risk management. After identifying the existing roles of men and women through gender analysis, gender mainstreaming helps to achieve equality in disaster

reduction by giving a comprehensive understanding of the possible effects of policies and measures developed for disaster reduction on gender roles. However, since disaster reduction and development have a close inter relationship, gender mainstreaming in disaster reduction is a parallel and inter-linked process to mainstreaming disaster reduction into sustainable development policies.

Keywords: Disaster, Gender, Mainstreaming, Sustainable, Women

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1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN, 2016) defines a disaster as a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society and the International Epidemiological Association as “an event that disrupts the normal conditions of existence” (Porta MS et.al 2014) Accordingly, epidemics have such a potential and can lead to important human, material, economic, or environmental losses resulting from interacting conditions of exposure, vulnerability, and capacity .In 2023 alone the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT) recorded a total of 399 disasters related to natural hazards and these events resulted in 86,473 fatalities and affected 93.1 million people and a total economic losses of US\$ 202.7 billion (EMDAT, 2023).Worsening climate change, environmental degradation, and extreme weather, coupled with poor planning and adaptation processes are escalating disasters at an alarming rate. The impacts of such disasters are highly gendered, with women and girls carrying the brunt of impacts such as the destruction of natural resources and infrastructure. Women and men differ in their vulnerability to disasters. Evidence shows that when it comes to deaths in disasters, women tend to be affected significantly more than men. Women and children (both boys and girls) are 14 times more likely than men to die in disasters (Bradshaw and Fordham [2013](#)).

Other studies, covering different types of natural disaster, also find that women die at a higher rate than men, particularly in developing countries (Doocy et al. 2013; Krishnaraj 1997; Pradhan et al. 2007; Sugimoto et al. 2011).Natural disasters take a toll on mental health and well-being. Women consistently show higher propensity towards depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders, while suicide is more common among men (Hammen 2005; Hawton and van Heeringen 2009; Olf et al. 2007).Studies have found that due to women’s roles as

care-givers, during natural disasters they are more likely to make sacrifices, such as eating less food, for the well-being of their families. They are also more at risk for economic vulnerability, as men often migrate because of natural disasters. This can lead to divorce, desertion, and polygamy. Child marriage often increases to mitigate this economic vulnerability for young girls (Randall,A.2016)

Therefore, mainstreaming gender in to disaster reduction policies and measures translates into identifying the ways in which women and men are positioned in society (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2002). Gender relations and gender power differences remain unexamined, particularly in disaster research and practice in advanced industrial societies.

2. GENDER DYNAMICS:

Gender dynamics impact both the way they are affected by disasters and their capacity to withstand and recover from them. Gender inequalities can result in gender-differentiated disaster impact, and differentiated impacts can influence gender dynamics, which in turn affect future resilience to shocks

All women, men, girls and boys do not face the same needs and vulnerabilities in the face of natural disasters and climate change; there are differences within each group and between individuals regarding specific protection concerns and capacities – for example, people with mental or physical disabilities, minorities and indigenous populations, the elderly, chronically ill, unaccompanied children, child headed household, female-headed households, widows, etc. – and over time throughout the disaster and post-disaster phases. Various factors, including social, economic, ethnic, cultural and physiological factors, affect not only the ways that disasters impact women, men, girls and boys, but also their coping strategies and their participation in prevention, relief, recovery and reconstruction processes. Studies have shown that how gender, race, ethnicity and poverty reduce resilience and exacerbate vulnerabilities (Fothergill & Peek, 2004).

Disaster management as a sector is treated largely as a male domain. This often leaves the gender concerns unheard with little focus on the female constraints and concern. The lower women participation in the disaster management processes can be attributed to the societal constraints. Typecast as miserable women awaiting strong-armed male rescuers, many women are in fact active disaster responders as well as particularly vulnerable to disaster impacts.

Violence tends to increase in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and women and children are at greater risk of physical and sexual violence in emergency settings (Gennari et al. 2015). Owing to a lack of adequate data on the incidence of pre-disaster event violence, it is difficult to measure the scale-up of violence (Bradshaw and Fordham 2013). However, qualitative evidence reveals an increase in the risk of both stranger-perpetrated sexual violence and intimate partner violence⁶ after natural disasters in developed and developing country settings.

High vulnerability of individuals, households or societies often translates into compromised resilience to disasters. Agencies operating in disaster scenarios identify women as a “vulnerable group” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2009).

Because pre-existing social structures heighten one’s vulnerability, already socioeconomically and physically disadvantaged groups such as the elderly, young children, the physically and mentally disabled, undocumented workers, and women and girls “have fewer resources to enable them to ‘bounce back’ to some measure of normality” (Mehta 2007, 5)

Disaster damage and loss assessments are seldom disaggregated by sex and are usually recorded in terms of productive resources, which tend to be owned by men. This leads to a substantial undervaluation of the impact on women (Badshaw and Fordham (2013).) Disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than the life expectancy of men. On average, natural hazards and their subsequent impacts kill more women than men or kill women at an earlier age than men (Neumayer and Plumper 2007) While “she survives a disaster such as a flood or earthquake, a woman will likely have fewer options to recover” (UN Women 2016, p. 22)

Responsibility towards children and other dependent household members is a significant aspect of women’s disaster work (Morrow and Enarson, 1996; Enarson and Morrow, 1997) which has important implications for preparedness, evacuation and other key disaster decisions. Domestic violence is largely unexamined in disaster studies and from battered women’s shelters and responding agencies (Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women, 1989; Godino and Coble, 1995; suggest that some women are at greater risk of male violence in the aftermath of disaster. Amid the fallout of disasters, women and girls also face heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

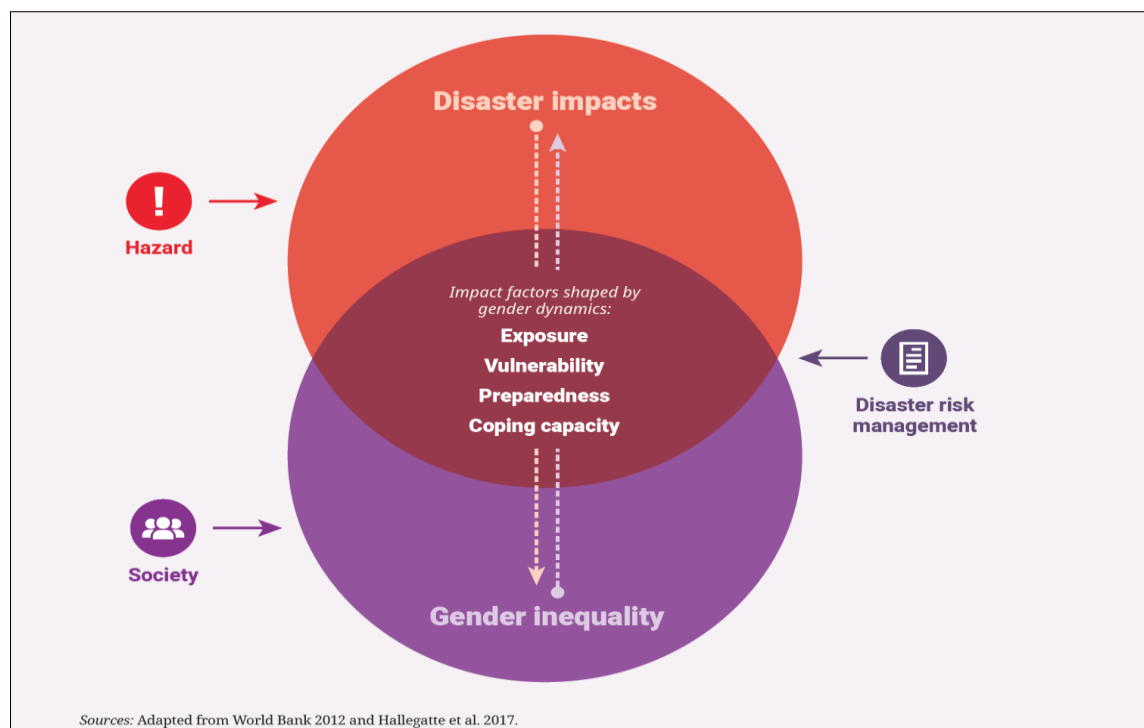


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for considering gender dynamics and disaster impacts

World Bank. 2012. World Development Report 2012. World Bank: Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8810-5>.

Equally, women living with disabilities tend to be more economically and socially marginalised than disabled men (Boylan, 1991) and women’s life-expectancy rates expose them on balance more than men to the physical disabilities of advanced age. To the degree that population’s age, then, they also become feminised; issues facing senior women, including rising poverty rates, are correspondingly more salient as population’s age.

Gender roles influence how men and women respond to disasters, both inside and outside official emergency agencies. Historically, women have been underrepresented in formal disaster management organizations (Gibbs, 1990). As a result, they are more likely to be involved in informal efforts. For example, in the United States, women have often taken the lead in community-based groups that address social needs during disasters (Neal and Phillips, 1990).

Research shows that men and women often volunteer in different ways during disasters. Men are more likely to take on roles like search and rescue, while women are more likely to provide care, food, and other emergency support (Wenger and James, 1994). Because of their careers, many women end up working in areas such as child care, family support, and mental

health—key parts of informal disaster response. However, this “feminized” pattern of disaster work may unintentionally make it harder for men to access these essential support services.

Vulnerability analysis shows how repeated and long-term disaster losses increase inequality and make certain groups, like low-income families, more vulnerable. These families often struggle to recover before the next disaster strikes, highlighting the importance of addressing both social and economic vulnerabilities.

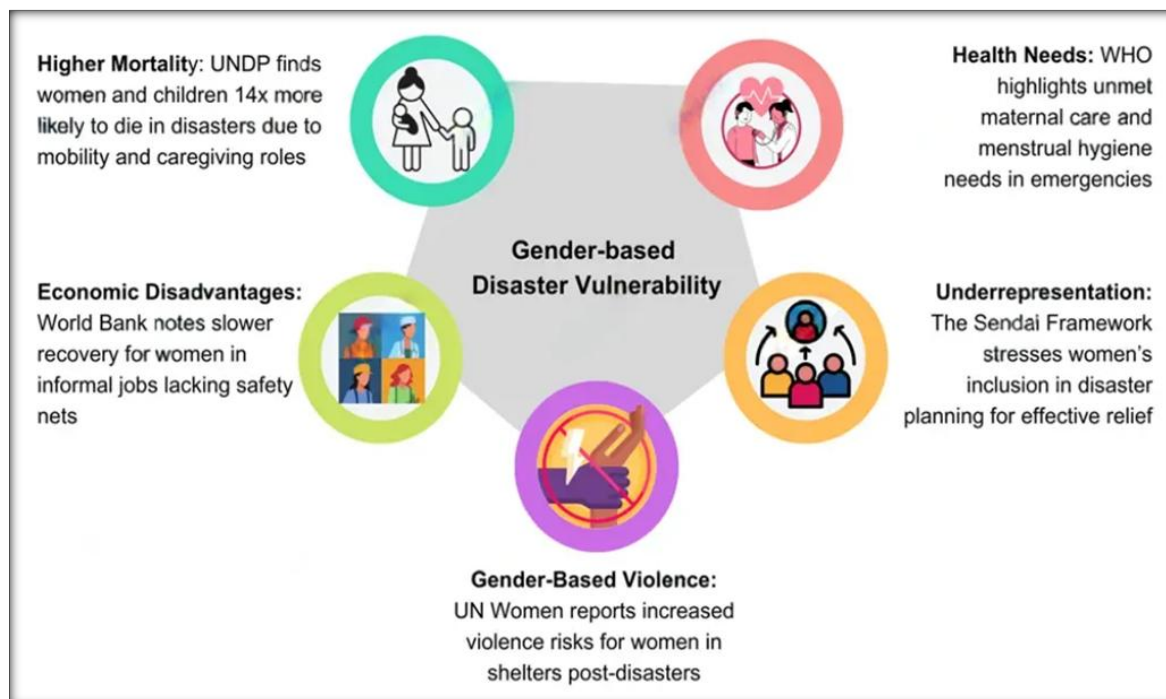


Figure 2 A Gender Based Disaster Vulnerability

3. ACKNOWLEDGING WOMEN ROLE IN DISASTER: A POLICY MATTER

Over time, there has been increasing recognition of women’s valuable knowledge, skills, and leadership in disaster situations (Bajracharya et al., 2022; Yadav et al., 2021). While women are often seen as vulnerable during disasters, they are also important contributors to effective disaster management (Haque et al., 2022;). However, much of the focus still remains on their vulnerability rather than their potential roles and strengths in managing disaster risks.

There is a significant opportunity to empower women through programs that build their skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities while challenging traditional social norms that limit their participation (Tanaka et al., 2019). Identifying and integrating women’s local knowledge and experiences can meaningfully improve disaster risk reduction efforts and add

to building more resilient communities. To appreciate this prospective, it is essential to take careful steps to exclude social obstacles, advance gender equality, and actively take account of women in decision-making roles. However, the lack of gender-sensitive data continues to obstruct the development of well-informed, targeted strategies that effectively address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of women

The declarations of 1995 as the year in the United Nation’s International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) to focus on women and children as the “key to prevention” provided impetus for practitioners around the world to document and share their work. National roundtables on women and emergencies resulted in practical initiatives in many countries, including new government committees and institutes (Tunisia, Guatemala, Iran), publications and exhibits (Ethiopia, Peru, Jordan), and organizations or conferences (Greece, Italy, Colombia), as reported in an IDNDR summary (1996). This mid-decade focus targeted the potential of women as an active and creative group central to community and household preparedness, crisis response, and recovery.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (Sendai Framework) seeks to reduce the impacts of disasters and enhance resilience. This Gender Action Plan to Support Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (Sendai GAP) aims to substantially increase gender-responsive disaster risk reduction by 2030. The guiding principles of the Sendai Framework recognize the need for a gender perspective to be integrated into all disaster risk reduction policies and practices, and highlight the importance of women’s participation and leadership.

Gender-Responsive Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is an approach that actively integrates gender perspectives into disaster management processes to ensure equitable outcomes for all groups, particularly focusing on women, men, girls, and boys. Recognizing that different genders face unique vulnerabilities and possess distinct capacities during disasters, gender-responsive DRR aims to address these disparities, leading to more effective and inclusive risk reduction.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals envisage that member countries will develop their development plans and policies until 2030, with an understanding that emphasizes the principle of human rights for all. The society is a whole with its men and women, and an approach has been taken within this framework while determining the sustainable development goals, 17 main goals and related objectives. SDG 5 in this context entails ensuring gender equality (United Nations [2023](#)).

4. POLICIES AND GUIDELINES ON GENDER ASPECTS IN INDIA

Disaster mitigation and risk reduction are closely linked to the global goal of achieving sustainable environmental, economic, and social development. Since women play a key role in family and community life, promoting gender equality and empowering women is essential to reaching this goal. Societies with more equal gender relations are better equipped to grow in a sustainable way and to manage risks and hazards more effectively.

The Prime Minister has enunciated ten-point agenda on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) during the Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (AMCDRR) held in New Delhi in November 2016. The all-inclusive agenda presents a holistic approach to disaster risk reduction and addresses a whole range of issues, from community preparedness to use of technology and international cooperation.

- National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP): The revised NDMP of 2019 emphasizes social inclusion, particularly gender, as a cross-cutting principle, requiring active involvement of women in disaster planning and implementation.
- Prime Minister's Ten-Point Agenda: The Prime Minister's ten-point agenda for disaster risk reduction also emphasizes greater involvement of women in risk reduction.
- Capacity Building Programs: The government has invested in building women's capacities for disaster risk management through training programs on early warning, psychosocial support, first aid, search and rescue, and shelter management.
- Mahila Contingent in NDRF: Mahila rescuers in NDRF teams have played an important role in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, including in the aftermath of earthquakes.

Women's Role in Disaster Management

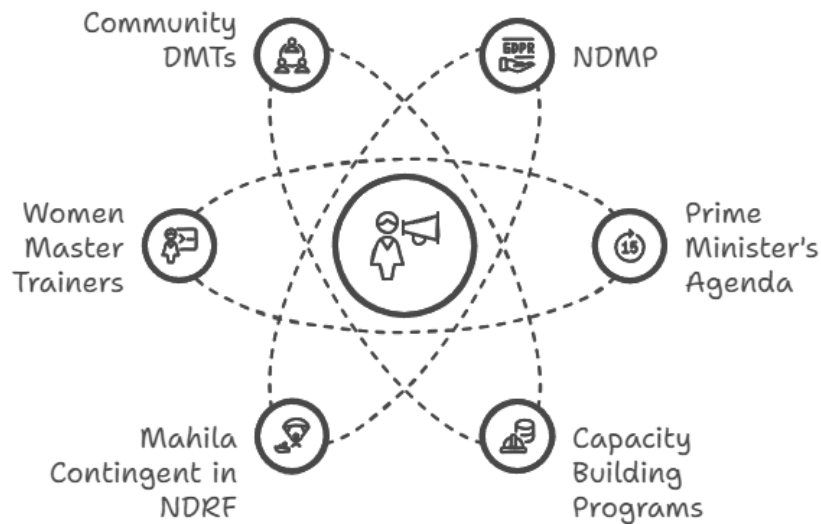


Figure 3 Gender Aspects in India

- **Women Master Trainers:** The use of women master trainers has proven effective in creating an enabling environment for other women to learn about disaster preparedness and participate in disaster management planning.
- **Community Disaster Management Teams (DMTs):** Women are encouraged to participate in the formation of DMTs and play a central role in discussions about community needs and resource

5. CONCLUSION:

Increasing female representation in disaster risk management and civil protection agencies helps legitimize and support women's contributions to disaster risk reduction and resilience. Women have long been involved in planning, preparing, and responding to disasters at community level, with little recognition. Providing women's groups with training, resources, and the authority to engage in preparedness and emergency response would strengthen their position in the community and ensure more women get disaster preparedness and response information

Gender concerns in disaster are under-researched which results in their slower adoption in policies and guidelines. Thus it is extremely necessary to address these impacts to develop societal resilience to hazards. Implementing gender sensitive approach will minimize gender differentiated impacts of disasters, build a resilient societies and lead to the proper utilization of the post disaster window of opportunity. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the gender roles of a society when planning for disasters and actively work to include gender perspectives in disaster management.

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