

# Gender Matters

Lessons for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia



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Lessons for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia

**Manjari Mehta**

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)  
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Mats G. Eriksson (Series Coordinator)  
Greta M. Rana (Consultant Editor)  
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# Foreword

Inhabitants in the Himalayan region are exposed to many natural hazards. The mountain ranges are young with an unstable geology, steep slopes, and a climate that is difficult to predict. As a result, the region is highly susceptible to natural hazards such as floods and flash floods, landslides, and earthquakes. In populated areas, these can lead to disaster. Vulnerable groups – the poor, women, and children – are often hit hardest.

Since its establishment in 1983, ICIMOD has dedicated much of its work to examining ways to reduce the risk of disasters from natural hazards, thereby working towards the decreased physical vulnerability of the people in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. This work has encompassed training courses, hazard mapping, landslide mitigation and control, mountain risk engineering, watershed management, vulnerability assessment, and much more. ICIMOD has also fostered regional and transboundary dialogue for improved management of both the resources provided and the risks threatened by the big rivers in the Himalayan region; sharing of hydro-meteorological data and information among the countries in the region is of particular importance for mitigating the risk of riverine and flash floods in the major river basins.

This publication is one of a series produced under the project ‘Living with risk – sharing knowledge on disaster preparedness in the Himalayan region’, implemented by ICIMOD during a 15-month period in 2006 and 2007. The project was funded by the European Commission through their Humanitarian Aid department (DG ECHO) as part of the Disaster Preparedness ECHO programme (DIPECHO) in South Asia, and by ICIMOD. Through this project, ICIMOD has endeavoured to encourage knowledge sharing and to strengthen capacity among key practitioners in the field of disaster preparedness and management. This has been done through training courses, workshops, knowledge compilation and dissemination, and the establishment of a website ([www.disasterpreparedness.icimod.org](http://www.disasterpreparedness.icimod.org)).

The publications resulting from this project include baseline assessments of the disaster preparedness status in the four target countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan); case studies and a framework on local knowledge for disaster preparedness; and gender and vulnerability aspects in disaster risk reduction. The publications, training sessions, and workshops were undertaken in the context of the ‘Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015’ which recommends that regional organisations should promote sharing of information; undertake and publish baseline assessments of disaster risk reduction status; and undertake research, training, education, and capacity building in the field of disaster risk reduction.

The long-term mission to bring the Himalayan region to an acceptable level of disaster risk has only just begun. The countries in the region are among the most disaster prone in the world in terms of number and severity of disasters, casualties, and impact on national economies. Only by strong commitment, hard work, and joint efforts can this situation be improved. It is ICIMOD's hope that our collective endeavours will help improve disaster risk reduction in the mountain region we are committed to serve.

Dr. Andreas Schild  
Director General  
ICIMOD

# Preface

The larger project of which this publication is a part addresses capacity development in multi-hazard risk assessment by providing a platform for enabling cross-regional interaction and exchange of ideas, knowledge and experiences in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. This document draws attention to gender as an indicator of vulnerability, with particular emphasis on how and why women are often disproportionately affected.

The idea of focusing on gender in a time of crisis may seem a misplaced priority. It is commonly assumed, both by the lay public and by disaster preparedness and management professionals alike, that natural disasters are ‘levellers,’ affecting everyone who comes within their orbit in a more or less equal fashion. Indeed, the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ thinking that guides disaster relief emphasises that the provision of assistance to the homeless, injured, and hungry needs to be addressed first and foremost, thus indicating that gender concerns must wait until more immediate needs have been met. But, in fact, disasters are extremely gendered events in terms of both their impacts and people’s responses to them. Failure to acknowledge this not only runs the risk of overlooking obvious and more subtle needs and priorities that can make all the difference between life and death, but can also diminish the efficiency of disaster responses, and even contribute to creating new categories of victims.

Although this synthesis of key findings from the literature contains nothing that has not been said before, given that gender remains peripheral to the field of disaster preparedness and management (hereafter DP/M) there is an urgent need to restate the obvious: gender matters. This document has been written with a view to appealing to key practitioners, whether at the policy or local levels, in order to reiterate how and in what ways natural disasters have different impacts on the sexes, and what can be done to integrate a gender perspective into disaster preparedness and management work in the South Asian context.

As the reader will note, this discussion focuses on women’s vulnerabilities, the root causes of which lie in their low social and economic status relative to men. This emphasis, however, by no means suggests that men do not also suffer in disasters or, in specific contexts, may even be the hardest hit. The central point this document conveys is that *disasters accentuate vulnerabilities*, that gender is an essential component in determining who is more vulnerable, and that it must be taken into account in risk reduction and management work.

Developing a gender-sensitive approach will not be achieved overnight: the integration of gender concerns and perspectives develops incrementally in an iterative manner through trial and error and, equally, the ability to confront the often difficult issues that gender evokes. It is hoped this report will contribute to this ongoing process.

Manjari Mehta, Ph.D.  
Dehra Dun (Uttarakhand), India

# Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mats Eriksson for inviting me to participate in the Regional Workshop on Disaster Preparedness Plans for Natural Hazards held at ICIMOD in August 2006, which for the first time exposed me to the centrality of gender in disaster preparedness and management. My year as gender specialist with the Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance programme (CEGG), and subsequent involvement in the Water, Hazards and Environmental Management programme (WHEM) workshops underscored for me the tremendous urgency of the need for developing a sustained dialogue on the mainstreaming of gender at all levels.

Thanks are due to Mats Eriksson, who read and commented on various versions of this report, and also to Farhana Ibrahim and Chandralekha Mehta who provided valuable inputs at the final stage, to Greta Rana for her skilful editing and pulling together of the final product, and to Mats Eriksson and Julie Dekens for sharing their photographs.

Last but not least, I thank Michael Kollmair and my colleagues in CEGG who supported me in this endeavour.

# Executive Summary

This report draws attention to gender as an indicator of vulnerability and discusses how women are disproportionately affected, particularly in the field of disaster preparedness and management (DP/M). It is divided into six sections.

The report commences by introducing the subject and how the research was carried out. It discusses why gender analysis is essential in the field of DP/M, and continues in the second section to examine the gendered contexts of risk and vulnerability and the many dimensions from which they should be approached: economic, social, educational, cultural, physical, organisational, motivational, and political.

The third section examines lessons from the field and how physiological vulnerabilities, sociocultural and economic marginalisation, and gender stereotyping effect whether an individual is killed or manages to survive. It also discusses the extent to which women are more at risk than men and how they have less access to aid and rehabilitation. Reasons for this are seen in structures of decision-making and women's weak bargaining power within the household. Examples are given from the Bangladesh cyclone of 1991, the Asian tsunamis, and the impact of Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998.

In 1991, in Bangladesh, many men failed to pass on to their wives the information about the cyclone delivered to them in the marketplace. In Central America women failed to evacuate themselves and their children because they were waiting for their partners to return and give them permission to leave their homes. The third section also discusses how women's sanitary and health needs are addressed (or not) following disasters citing instances from the Pakistan, Kashmir earthquake of 2005. Also of concern in terms of women's vulnerability are issues such as economic vulnerability and being denied access to relief and compensation and cultural reasons for these; increase in their workloads; and gender-based violence following the trauma of disasters.

The following section discusses that one approach to DP/M is developing community resilience and making women part of the solution. A gender perspective can help to make this possible by increasing understanding of how women can become keys to hazard prevention within the community and natural disasters can actually be built upon as opportunities for social change. Examples of how this works are taken from disaster preparedness and relief work in Bangladesh and the development of new institutional structures by a non-government organisation, Pattan, in Pakistan following the floods of 1992. Other examples of developing women's self-confidence and integrating recovery and relief work with economic self-sufficiency and long-term sustainable development are taken from Nepal and India. In conclusion, the section emphasises that people's ability to cope with crises and recover from them include material, physical, and social resources as well as beliefs and attitudes.

The fifth section examines how gender analysis in disaster preparedness and management can reveal how a community works and the various roles and structures followed by men and women within it. It then discusses what gender-sensitive outreach looks like and how to use it.

The sixth section concludes the report by summarising the discussions put forward and the challenges and opportunities for gender mainstreaming. It makes recommendations based on seven essential steps for imparting gender-sensitive disaster preparedness and management (DP/M). In addition to the main report, five short annexes complement the discussions with different aspects of and charts for gender-sensitive analysis in DP/M.

# Acronyms and Abbreviations

AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
BRIDGE	Internet group offering on-line gender briefs
CEDPA	Centre for Development and Population Activities
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DAW	Division for Advancement of Women
DMI	Disaster Mitigation Institute
DP/M	disaster preparedness and management
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the UN)
HIV/AIDS	human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
ISDR	International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
ITDG	Intermediate Technology Development Group (now Practical Action)
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
NGO	non-government organisation
NWFP	North West Frontier Province (of Pakistan)
PAHO	Pan American Health Organisation
SEAGA	socioeconomic and gender analysis
SEEDS	Sustainable Development and Ecological Development Society
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization



# Some Key Terms

**Capacity** – A combination of all the strengths and resources available within a community, society, or organisation that can reduce the level of risk, or the effects of a disaster.

**Disaster** – A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.

**Disaster risk reduction (disaster reduction)** – The conceptual framework of elements considered with the possibilities to minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout a society, to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development.

**Hazard** – A potentially damaging physical event, phenomenon or human activity that may cause the loss of life or injury, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation.

**Mitigation** – Structural and non-structural measures undertaken to limit the adverse impact of natural hazards, environmental degradation and technological hazards.

**Preparedness** – Activities and measures taken in advance to ensure effective response to the impact of hazards, including the issuance of timely and effective early warnings and the temporary evacuation of people and property from threatened locations.

**Resilience/resilient** – The capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. It is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organising itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures.

**Risk** – The probability of harmful consequences, or expected losses (deaths, injuries, property, livelihoods, economic activity disrupted or environmental damaged) resulting from interactions between natural or human-induced hazards and vulnerable conditions. Conventionally risk is expressed by the notation  $\text{Risk} = \text{Hazards} \times \text{Vulnerability}$ . Some disciplines also include the concept of exposure to refer particularly to the physical aspects of vulnerability. A disaster is a function of the risk process. It results from the combination of hazards, conditions of vulnerability and insufficient capacity or measures to reduce the potential negative consequences of risk.

**Risk assessment or analysis** – A methodology to determine the nature and extent of risk by analysing potential hazards and evaluating existing conditions of vulnerability that could pose a potential threat or harm to people, property, livelihoods and the environment on which they depend.

**Vulnerability** – The conditions determined by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards.

Adapted from UN/ISDR (2004)

