

# Gender Matters

## Lessons for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia

### Introduction

"Disasters work like the magnifying glass of a society. They magnify what is good and what needs sincere help. Disasters do not affect everyone equally. Who you are and what you do determine your fate.

The strong and the weak stand out.

This is true for gender issues as much as for other issues."

- Civil servant, Rajasthan, India (Schwoebel and Menon 2004)

### The case for a gender analysis of disaster

**W**hat does gender have to do with natural disasters? Whereas catastrophic events obviously pose a threat to everyone caught in their proximity, what is less well appreciated is that disasters also have gender-differentiated outcomes. A considerable amount of literature published over the past decade and a half emphasises the extent to which gender inequalities, expressed in women's social and economic marginalisation vis à vis men, often result in women bearing a disproportionate burden of the costs of disasters (Byrne and Baden 1995; Delaney and Shrader 2000; Enarson 2001b; Twigg 2004; United Nations 2004). However, despite indisputable evidence that women are disproportionately affected by disasters, gender remains a peripheral concern in the field of disaster preparedness, relief, and management; and it is typically incorporated into the work of only a handful of gender-aware non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups (ALNAP 2005; IFRC 2006).

This lack of a gender perspective in disaster preparedness and management work is a matter of serious concern at a time when large-scale, devastating natural disasters dominate the headlines with alarming regularity. In less than a year between 2004-2005 three major natural disasters – the Asian tsunami, followed by the infamous Hurricane Katrina and, subsequently, the Kashmir earthquake – captured global attention. These and countless other catastrophes, the images of which we have not seen, have affected hundreds of thousands of people; wrought untold social, economic, and environmental damage; and underscored the challenges of both relief work and the global donor community's ability to respond adequately to the task of

rehabilitating and rebuilding the communities destroyed. All too pertinent a point to practitioners in mountain development is the fact that mountain areas are at greater exposure to natural hazards than elsewhere. Rugged topography and volatile seismic activity and individual exposure to the effects of altitude are among the reasons for this increased exposure to possible disasters. Mountain women, therefore, are often doubly marginalised – by gender, and by geography. The ways in which the fact of being male or female, elderly, or very young often play a decisive role in determining whether an individual dies or manages to survive and, having survived, the type of access (relatively easy, limited, or none at all) he or she has to aid and rehabilitation are less visible.

## The policy context

The past decade has witnessed a paradigm shift in thinking about and responding to disasters. Emerging out of a growing concern that the social and economic costs of disasters are not only holding back the processes of sustainable development but are also major obstacles to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, contemporary thinking now places hazard and vulnerability reduction within the broader context of the development process, focusing as much on longer-term development needs as on obvious short-term, life-saving goals (UNDP 2004; United Nations 2006). The Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005-2015 (United Nations 2006), which provides the central framework for informing countries' risk reduction measures and post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation processes, also calls for a gender perspective to be integrated into all disaster reduction management plans, policies, and decision-making processes. Accompanying this policy shift is a new way of conceptualising disasters, their associated risks, vulnerabilities, and outcomes: not simply as isolated events, the consequences of nature gone badly awry, but, rather, as social events that are embedded in human choices, decisions, and actions (Bradshaw 2004b; Enarson 2001c; United Nations 2004). The opening up of a field that has hitherto been perceived to simply address geophysical outcomes through technical solutions is welcome. Nevertheless, many challenges remain and there is still a sizeable gap between rhetoric and action.

## Scope of the report: why is gender analysis essential?

Responding to this gap, this report seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the 'gendered nature of potential vulnerabilities' (Fordham n.d.) in the context of disasters in South Asia through a synthesis of conceptual and empirical material drawn from case studies from around the world.

Gender roles and cultural contexts ensure that in both the household and in the community, women and men often have distinct roles, responsibilities, and differential access to a range of social, economic, and political resources. These in turn shape their ability to prepare for and protect themselves from disaster. An understanding of these gender-differentiated situations and the priorities they can give rise to can play a vital role in strengthening disaster prevention, relief, and rehabilitation work. This can be achieved by helping to develop culturally- and gender-appropriate protection and mitigation strategies that are grounded in the coping strategies, knowledge, and energy

of local communities. A gender perspective can also play a valuable part in highlighting the contributions men and women, as members of communities most susceptible to hazards, can and do play in strengthening resilience to disasters at the local level. Looking at people as gendered beings thus provides an essential lens through which to see how the fact of being male or female – coupled with other intersecting ‘social fault lines’ – has a great deal to do with their ability to cope with and ‘bounce back’ from the effects of disasters. In particular, gender analysis provides the following:

- Illuminates the gender inequalities that render women and girls more susceptible to the risks and outcomes of natural disasters and helps to address future vulnerabilities by providing livelihood assistance to those who are most vulnerable
- Helps to ensure that resources reach the people most in need, women and men alike
- Ensures a greater likelihood of providing culturally- and gender-appropriate resources and services (i.e., housing, foodstuff, clothing, and other personal needs)
- Recognises the vital role local capacities play in preparing for and responding to disasters

The main body report is complemented by Annexes: Annex 1 deals with aspects useful for gender-sensitive analysis of communities before and after disasters (see above); Annex 2 contains a Livelihoods’ Analysis; Annex 3 gives gender-sensitive, post-disaster reconstruction guidelines; Annex 4 is on issues to be considered in developing gender-sensitive outreach; and Annex 5 is a self-assessment tool for agencies involved in disaster response. They are not all cited in the text, but follow logically from recommendations arising from the discussion as a whole.

