

The gendered contexts of risk and vulnerability (as if men are not affected!)

“A massive earthquake or volcanic eruption simply lays bare the inequalities of social development which place some people more than others in risky living conditions... and undermine their capacity to mitigate, survive or fully recover from the effects of catastrophe.”

(Enarson 2000)

Gender and disasters: clarifications and definitions

What is it about gender relations, generally, and women’s roles and responsibilities, in particular, that shape people’s experiences of disasters?

First, some clarification is needed. The term ‘gender’ is often taken to refer only to women. In fact, it refers to both women and men in relation to one another, pertaining to the appropriate roles, activities, and responsibilities attributed to women and men in a given society, and the socially determined norms and values that these place on them. At the heart of gender norms lies a *power differential* that typically values the characteristics, work, and behaviour of males over those of females. The fact that discussions of gender along with gender analyses and training very often focus on women rather than men reflects the extent to which the male experience – along with needs, priorities and concerns – has uncritically been accepted as the female experience as well.

This set of roles, values, and beliefs, referred to as gender systems, assumes significance because it determines the resources and opportunities to which an individual has access and to which he/she is exposed. Because of the way in which power (political, economic, social) is distributed throughout much of South Asia, women usually have considerably less access to and control over resources to protect their well-being, and they are also less likely to be involved in decision-making about key issues in their lives (WHO 2002). This is especially visible at the household level where most females have less access to critical resources and less voice in decision-making than males. At its most extreme, this differential is manifested in the disproportionately poorer health and nutritional status, lower levels of literacy and education, and higher morbidity/mortality rates of women and girls compared to men and boys (Gurung 1999; UNICEF 2006). Thus, while men are obviously affected (and, depending on context, often harder hit by disasters) the broad trend in South Asia and elsewhere is that women have special difficulty in withstanding and responding to crisis situations (Chew and Ramdass 2005; Enarson 2000; SEEDS 2005).

Gender as a source of vulnerability

Although natural disasters affect everyone within their orbit, they are not ‘levellers’ in that their impacts do not fall on everyone in the same way. On the contrary, the *risk of vulnerability* and the *impacts of disaster* are disproportionately borne by those who are already socioeconomically and physically disadvantaged and who have fewer resources to enable them to ‘bounce back’ to some measure of normality. These include the very young and very old, those living in poverty, ethnic minorities, the physically and mentally disabled, and women — especially those who are poor, elderly, pregnant, or lactating.

Populations at risk in South Asia include the following (Delaney and Shrader 2000; Enarson 2002a):

- *Those living in hazardous areas or conditions*, including inadequate housing
- *The illiterate* who are unable to read early warning announcements and instructions, and who are less likely to participate in disaster preparedness training
- *Small agricultural producers* who are disproportionately located on hillsides and river embankments that are subject to erosion and who are at grave risk of losing their sole forms of investment: seeds, implements, animals
- *Female-headed households* that are more vulnerable to poverty to begin with, more likely to have limited assets, have a slower rate of return to ‘normal,’ and have limited security of land tenure
- *Indigenous women and men* whose vulnerability in all the above factors is likely to be reinforced by their cultural and linguistic marginalisation
- *The elderly, young mothers, the ill, and disabled*



Gender relations, in particular, appear to be a ‘pre-condition’ of people’s ability to anticipate, prepare for, survive, cope with, and recover from disasters. The World Health Organisation notes “a pattern of gender differentiation at all levels of the disaster process: exposure to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical impact, psychological impact, recovery and reconstruction” (WHO 2002). This stems not so much from *gender differences* per se – that is, biological and physical differences (although these can and do put women at risk, e.g., during pregnancies when mobility may be considerably reduced) – but rather from *gender inequalities*. Gender roles and statuses that give women considerably less access than men to productive and social resources and decision-making processes often place them at social, economic, and political disadvantage relative to men. Thus, while men are obviously affected (and, depending on context, often harder hit by disasters) the broad trend in South Asia and elsewhere is that women find it harder than men to withstand and respond to crisis situations (IFRC 2006; Twigg 2004).

Box 1: Vulnerabilities are multi-dimensional

- *Economic*: lack of access to critical resources (including money and access to credit)
- *Social*: erosion of social structures and social support systems
- *Ecological*: degradation of the environment and the natural resource bases on which subsistence livelihoods depend
- *Educational*: illiteracy and/or lack of adequate access to information and knowledge
- *Cultural*: beliefs and customs that constrain people’s movements and options
- *Physical*: poorly-built construction or individuals who are weak and unable to care for themselves
- *Organisational*: lack of strong national and local institutional structures
- *Motivational*: lack or weakness of public awareness
- *Political*: limited access to political power and representation

(Yoner et al. cited in SEEDS 2005)

Gender (along with class, ethnicity, and other social markers of identity, privilege, and marginality) intersects with each of these categories to reinforce people’s susceptibilities to disaster. Household relations and dynamics also play a critical role in determining people’s levels of risk and vulnerability because the domestic arena is where gender relations, roles, and responsibilities, as well as the privileges and entitlements that arise from them, are enacted (Bradshaw 2004b). They are also the locales within which the ‘cultural permission’ to behave in ways that either maximise or jeopardise personal safety is inculcated through the socialisation process.

By and large, in South Asia, the reasons for women’s greater socioeconomic marginality and, hence, vulnerability stem from the following reasons:

- Having less access to resources – skills, literacy, decision-making, mobility, employment, freedom from violence – that are vital for responding to circumstances created by disasters

- Sociocultural practices that restrict women’s spatial mobility, limit their ability to earn cash income, and limit their independent engagement in decision-making that affects their lives and health conditions (In addition, because children are the primary responsibility of their mothers and female kin, women’s social and economic statuses have a profound impact on children’s ability to cope with and survive disasters.)
- Carrying the double burden of productive and reproductive (domestic) work; and being over-represented in the informal economy and agricultural sectors which, in addition to being underpaid and having little security, tend to be most affected by natural disasters
- Having primary responsibility for domestic work and caring for children and elders which, along with sociocultural constraints on their physical mobility, give them little flexibility to pursue employment opportunities following disasters
- Having their needs for economic support overlooked by relief and rehabilitation initiatives

Box 2: Socioeconomic marginality can shape vulnerability to disasters

An assessment of gender issues in disaster situations funded by the UNDP was carried out in four VDCs in Nepal. It illustrates how the interplay of gender roles and relations with social and economic marginality can have very concrete impacts on women. While disasters obviously have painful outcomes for everyone caught in their midst, they are particularly difficult for women because:

- they suffer more from the loss of children killed or because of risky deliveries;
- when household incomes and food security are affected, women’s jewellery (often their only source of economic security) tends to be sold first to cover expenditure;
- in the event of food shortfalls, women are more likely to eat less; and
- when men migrate out in search of income-generating opportunities, women are left to pick up the slack; if they migrate out, they face relatively harder adjustments to their new situations.

(Thapa 2001)

Even though we say that women suffer disproportionately, however, it does not mean that all women suffer more than men or that their experiences are necessarily similar to one another. Like men, women are not a homogenous group. On the contrary, gender intersects class, caste, religion, ethnicity, ability, and other markers of social identity and condition to determine the differential levels of risk and vulnerability experienced by different categories of women and men. Thus, a poor woman or man (gender + class) will in all likelihood experience different sets of constraints, options, and risks than a better-off woman or man; this is also the case for a poor woman or man from a socially marginalised group (gender+class+ethnicity/caste). Differentials of risk and vulnerability are exacerbated by certain aspects of women’s physiology and biology: pregnant and lactating women may be considerably more exposed to risk than those who, otherwise healthy, able-bodied, and of the same sort of age, are neither pregnant nor facing constraints on their mobility.

Several factors that emerge primarily out of gender inequities increase women's and girls' risks in times of crisis (Enarson 2002b). They include the following.

- Limitations related to childbirth and pregnancy and limited control over reproductive health
- Usually longer lifespan than men and resultant decreased mobility, chronic illness, and disabilities associated with age
- Risk of domestic and sexual violence
- Likelihood of being the sole economic providers
- Lower incomes than men, more economic dependency, limited access to credit
- Limited likelihood of control over productive resources
- Proportionately greater responsibility than men for dependents (the very young, elderly, disabled, ill)
- Higher illiteracy rates, lower educational and training levels than men
- Limited physical mobility
- Less decision-making in homes and political institutions than men
- Greater social isolation than men
- Poor representation in emergency management organisations and professions
- Less knowledge of how to access emergency assistance and the capacity to do so than men

Together these give rise to multiple crosscutting vulnerabilities, including social vulnerability resulting from lack of inclusion in decision-making; physical vulnerability due to limited access to and control over economic and physical resources such as money, housing, land, and other assets; and psychological vulnerability caused by perceptions of having little or no control over one's life. These issues are elaborated upon in detail in the following section drawing on empirical findings from researchers and field workers in the field of disaster relief and rehabilitation, as well as on narrative accounts of those whose lives have been affected by the chaos that disasters cause. For aspects useful for gender sensitive analysis of communities before and after disasters, see Annex 1.

