

Gender and Natural Disasters: New Challenges for Mountain Development

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The alarming increase in the incidence and scope of natural disasters since the 1990s has placed disaster preparedness and management at the forefront of global and national development agendas (WHO 2002, IUCN 2006). This has important implications for mountain development in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, given that Asian mountains suffer disproportionately from heightened vulnerability to natural hazards and that mountain communities routinely face risks of floods, earthquakes, and landslides.

In 2006, the Water, Hazards and Environmental Management (WHEM) Programme at ICIMOD initiated a European Commission-supported project to develop capacity in multi-hazard risk assessment and to provide a platform for enabling cross-regional interaction and exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. One element of the project, to which the Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance (CEGG) Programme has contributed, draws attention to gender as a dimension of vulnerability. The project aims to generate greater awareness of how and in what ways natural disasters have differential impacts on the sexes, and to lay out a framework for integrating a gender perspective into disaster preparedness and management in the South Asian context.

That gender is a factor in shaping people's vulnerability to disaster is not immediately obvious: It is generally believed that disasters are great 'levellers,' affecting everyone within their orbit in much the same way. In fact, the *risk of vulnerability* and the *impacts of disaster* are disproportionately carried by those who are already socioeconomically and physically disadvantaged and who have fewer resources to 'bounce back' to normality. Gender relations in particular appear to be a precondition of people's ability to anticipate, prepare for, survive, cope with, and recover from disaster. 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,



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"Our houses that just collapsed were better than the new ones!"- Dalit women from Deuri VDC, Dhanusha District, Eastern Nepal, in a focus group discussion about their experience with floods.

depending on context, often harder hit by disasters) the broad trend in South Asia and elsewhere is that women have an especially difficult ability to withstand and respond to crisis situations (Enarson 2001, UN 2004).

The experience of disasters in the region over the past decade-and-a-half illustrates how physiological vulnerabilities, socio-cultural and economic marginalisation, and gender stereotypes informing policy and relief work can make all the difference in whether an individual survives a disaster or not and, having survived, the extent of access he or she has to aid and rehabilitation afterwards.

In many disasters females suffer higher mortality rates. During the Bangladesh cyclone of 1991, mortality levels amongst females over the age of ten were three times higher than that of males; while in the Maharashtra, India earthquake of 1993, women constituted 48% of the affected populations but constituted 55% of those who died. In the Asian tsunamis, five times as many women as men are believed to have died, and disproportionate numbers of women were killed in the earthquake that devastated large areas of northern Pakistan in 2005 (Chew and Ramdas 2005).

Physiological and biological factors partially account for gender-differentiated mortality rates. Women's physical size, states of pregnancy and lactation, their

primary responsibility for infants, small children, and the elderly and, often, clothing may all serve to slow them down in crises where timing is everything. Less obvious issues also affect women's ability to protect themselves. In much of South Asia women and men have different kinds of 'cultural permission' to move about in physical spaces: anecdotal evidence from the Pakistan earthquake suggests there was a higher female mortality rate in areas where 'purdah' norms prevailed compared to those where women were more easily able to flee their homes on their own. During the Bangladeshi cyclone of 1991, early warning systems may not have reached women who, in addition, were reluctant to move far from home and thus lost their lives waiting for their men folk to return to make the decision to go to relief shelters.

Socialisation processes are also implicated in inculcating in girls and women a 'learned powerlessness': in some tsunami-affected regions the disproportionate number of female deaths is attributed to the fact that, unlike boys and men, girls and women were less likely to know how to swim or thought they couldn't climb trees or roofs to save themselves (Chew and Ramdas 2005). Finally, women's domestic responsibilities are likely to keep them inside or close to dwellings, rendering them more susceptible to injuries or death when these dwellings collapse.

The power of 'cultural permission' in shaping women's mobility or lack thereof also affects their ability to benefit from relief efforts. Prevailing social norms in northern Pakistan made it hard for widows, single women, and women-headed households to access relief or the tent camps that had been set up outside their local areas

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because of concern of having to deal with unrelated men (IUCN, 2006). Similarly, sex-segregation norms in Bangladesh and Afghanistan have prevented women from taking the initiative to go to shelters and relief centres where they would have to deal with non-kin males, a concern which has also been noted in areas where no formal constraints on women's physical mobility exists.

Women also experience a harder time recovering from disasters. Compared to men, they often have less access to education, productive resources, and income-generating opportunities. They constitute a disproportionately higher number of the unemployed or those employed in marginally paid work, and carry a double work burden that combines their primary responsibility for domestic work with supporting their households through productive labour in farming and a range of off-farm activities. Despite their work contributions, women lack equal access to decision-making pertaining to divisions of labour, control of household resources or their well-being. It is commonplace throughout South Asia for women to have poorer health and nutritional status, for widows to be socially stigmatised, and for girl-children to be subject to a host of discriminatory practices relative to their male counterparts. As a result, after disasters they are more vulnerable to destitution, which in turn renders them susceptible to labour exploitation and trafficking.

Women's socio-cultural and economic vulnerabilities are further accentuated in the aftermath of disasters by gender-blind official thinking. The common gender stereotype permeating thinking at both policy and field levels is of the male head of household, whilst women are seen as secondary income-earners. Consequently, compensation, assistance, jobs, and training tend to be directed at men only: in one area of Sri Lanka in the post-tsunami period, women whose husbands

had died were unable to claim compensation money. Female heads of households also face considerable hardships in putting their lives together after disaster since they lack collateral to raise funds for alternative economic activities, often lack awareness of their legal rights to property and, being less mobile than men, find it hard to migrate in search of work.

Finally, despite women's roles as 'first responders' in disasters, they tend to be excluded from participating in policy and decision-making in reconstruction efforts. This lack of participation can reveal itself in startling ways: in Sri Lanka, the lack of women's inputs into housing designs resulted in dwellings being built that lacked kitchen facilities (Chew and Ramdas, 2005).

In much of South Asia, different kinds of 'cultural permission' and a 'learned powerlessness' inculcated in women and girls contribute to a higher disaster toll for women.

Gender matters in disaster risk reduction for both women and men. Taking it into account contributes to more equitable responses to people in crises, and helps to ensure that human and material resources are used efficiently. ICIMOD is ideally situated to initiate dialogues on gender and disaster with practitioners at the policy, development, and field levels in the HKH region, facilitating documentation and disseminating lessons learned and best practices emerging from disaster situations from across the region. The real challenge is for national governments and the development community to find the political will and capacity to develop and put gender-sensitive methodologies into practice.

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