

Why Gender? Why Women? An Introduction to Women and Disaster

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Disasters are complex and quintessentially social events, reflecting not so much uncontrolled brute forces as the interaction of hazards and natural events with social structures and political communities (Mileti et al. 1975; Dynes et al. 1987; Drabek 1986). Paradoxically, we learn most about ourselves and the physical, social, and political environments we have constructed when our taken-for-granted lives are disrupted. While rapid-onset disaster events like earthquakes or hurricanes capture headlines, most people around the world are at greater risk of harm from chronic, often less visible, hazards such as the rising waters of the flood plain, famine, or environmental degradation (Blaikie et al. 1994). Indeed, the challenges of daily life are a “permanent disaster” (Maskrey 1989) for many of the world’s most impoverished people.

The human and economic costs of disaster are rising as the century comes to an end, reflecting not just the vagaries of nature but continuing urbanization, impoverization, and global patterns of unsustainable development. The most tragic example of human loss is Bangladesh, where disasters have resulted in the deaths of more than 600,000 people over the last twenty years (Alexander 1995). In more developed nations, death tolls tend to be lower but the economics are staggering. The estimated cost of Hurricane Andrew, the most expensive U.S. natural disaster to date, has reached \$28 billion (Hebert et al. 1996). The total damage resulting from natural disasters in the Asia-Pacific region in 1995 alone has been estimated at \$12 billion and the cost of a single earthquake (Kobe, Japan) at more than \$50 billion (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 1995). These facts help explain the global call for expanded disaster mitigation. Social scientists and disaster managers alike want and need to know how communities think about the risk from hazards, and how they organize to mitigate, prepare for, survive, and recover from disasters.

The destructive forces of disasters leave a wake of social upheaval and human suffering. They also fascinate students of human behavior, social organization, and

social change. Characteristically functionalist in spirit, U.S. disaster researchers have concentrated largely on the single, unexpected event in isolation from the sociopolitical and cultural predisaster context and on rebounding social systems and individual distress. These studies have in the main ignored interactions between disaster and economic or racial/ethnic stratification, although in the last decade the disaster experiences of minority populations and the poor have been more directly addressed (e.g., Bolin and Bolton 1986; Perry and Mushkatel 1986; Perry 1987; Perry and Lindell 1991; Phillips 1993; Peacock et al. 1997).

Vulnerabilities to disaster are not, however, equally distributed. Unsustainable global patterns of settlement, resource management, social organization, and political economy increasingly put some population groups more than others at risk from disaster (Cutter 1995; Blaikie et al. 1994; Downs et al. 1991; Anderson and Woodrow 1989; Oliver-Smith 1986; Anderson 1994; Maskrey 1989; Varley 1994a). Exposure to environmental hazard and risk of catastrophic disaster, like other life chances, are shaped by overarching social structures of caste and class, race and ethnicity, age and physical ability, and sex and gender. Individuals and social groups carry different and disproportionate "vulnerability bundles" (Cannon 1994). Households and communities vary significantly in terms of disaster impacts and available private and public resources for responding to and recovering from crisis (Bolin 1982, 1993; Winchester 1992; Wiest et al. 1994).

When the dust clears or the waters recede, poor families around the world suffer *the greatest losses and have access to the least public, as well as private, recovery assets*, both in developing postcolonial societies and wealthy industrial nations like the United States (e.g., Bolin 1982, 1986; Bates 1982). These disadvantages are particularly significant when children and elders are supported by women, as are increasing numbers in the United States and throughout the world (Ahlburg and DeVita 1992; Jacobson 1993). On balance, women are the population most at risk when hazardous conditions unfold as disastrous events, from cyclone to drought (Ikeda 1995; Schroeder 1987; Vaughan 1987). The authors of the leading text on vulnerability make this point in *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters* (Blaikie et al. 1994:48):

Gender is a pervasive division affecting all societies, and it channels access to social and economic resources away from women and towards men. Women are often denied the vote, the right to inherit land, and generally have less control over income-earning opportunities and cash within their own households. Normally their access to resources is inferior to that of men. Since our argument is that less access to resources, in the absence of other compensations to provide safe conditions, leads to increased vulnerability, we contend that in general women are more vulnerable to hazards.

Disasters reveal community, regional, and global power structures, as well as power relations within intimate relationships. Convincing theoretical arguments have been developed for analyzing disaster more broadly, particularly the interaction among cultural and organizational components (e.g., Oliver-Smith 1986; Erikson 1976; Faupel 1985) and the sociopolitical ecology of disasters (Bates

and Peacock 1993; Bates and Pelanda 1994; Peacock et al. 1997). These ways of thinking about disaster acknowledge conflict as well as cooperation within human communities and situate the analysis of hazard and risk in structural context. This emerging framework is particularly appropriate for examining gender and disaster, an endeavor to which feminist theory and gender scholarship also contribute.

THE GENDERED TERRAIN OF DISASTER

Disasters teach many lessons, if often in the negative case—where not to build, where not to locate a dam or to harvest timber, how not to rehouse or relocate survivors. One of the lessons learned, when we ask the right questions, is how gender relations impinge on the experience and recovery from disaster. As pervasive as the economic, race, and age relations characterizing social systems, gender relations often remain obscure, if only because they are so much a part of our taken-for-granted world as women and men.

Gender does not gain meaning through socialization into a discrete gender role, any more than social class or ethnicity are taken on as roles, but is a primary organizing principle of social life. Its significance arises in a complex matrix of race, ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality, and age and is changed through life experience and political struggle (e.g., Eisenstein 1994; Baca Zinn et al. 1994; Peterson and Runyan 1993; Brydon and Chant 1989). Social scientists have documented in rich detail how historically specific patterns of gender relations within any culture or community shape individual identity and social interaction, segregating, stratifying, and symbolically engendering key social institutions (for overviews, see Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Hess and Ferree 1987; Lorber 1994). The result is not uniformity in women's experiences but rather diversity, both within any given society and among the world's cultures. Like the racial identity of "whites," the gender of men is often forgotten but certainly their lives are shaped by gender and gender relations.

Cross-culturally, gender power and privilege shape the division of labor in everyday routines and in the global economy, control over land and tools, access to training and formal education, the practice of science and the arts, control over one's body and time, housing conditions and transportation patterns, the use of public spaces, nutrition and health services, recreation, expressions of emotion and sexuality and, of course, military, religious, political and economic institutions (for an overview, see Epstein 1988; Lorber 1994; Turpin and Lorentzen 1996; Ward 1990; Connell 1987, 1995). Sex and gender function as markers for distributing such life chances as exposure to violence, literacy and self-expression, even the sheer chance to be born and to thrive. Disaster survival is a case in point, painfully illustrated by the account of one desperate Bangladeshi father of five daughters and a son caught up in cyclone and flood (Akhter 1992:64): "In his struggle to survive, [he] released his daughters one after the other, so his son could survive."

The social experience of disaster affirms, reflects, disrupts, and otherwise engages gendered social relationships, practices, and institutions. Disasters unfold

in these highly gendered social systems. Disaster management is correspondingly engendered, shaping the environmental decisions we make and contingencies we fail to plan for, the dynamics of our disaster-management organizations and relief operations, the disaster-responding household and emergent response groups, the decision-makers we choose and the heroes we create. Disaster is certainly gendered in the discourse we employ to depict and speak about natural disaster, how we theorize and study disaster, who is trained and how, what work is published or funded—and who the “we” is in disaster practice.

Arising from a perceived need for civil defense and preparedness, disaster practice has traditionally been associated with civil defense agencies, the military, emergency medicine, engineering and related professions, and crisis relief agencies. At the higher levels, it has largely been the practice of men whose experiences and attitudes reflected cultural norms of gender, class, and racial privilege. Like the proverbial fish in water, most male students of disaster worked in male-dominated environments in which the work at hand was undertaken “through the eyes of men.” This legacy of unexamined male bias in research, theory, and practice helps explain why we have learned as little about men’s emotional work during disaster recovery as about women’s physical work. Gender relations and gender power differences remain unexamined, particularly in disaster research and practice in advanced industrial societies.

Observers of disaster vulnerability in the emerging societies of Africa, Latin America, and Asia are more sensitive to gender dynamics but also tend to subsume gender under the rubric of class and culture. Excepting the recent work of Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, and Wisner (1994) and the earlier literature on gender, drought, and famine (Agarwal 1990; Jiggins 1986; Vaughan 1987; Schroeder 1987; Downs et al. 1991), women and gender relations are rarely analyzed directly. Among other topics, gender relations in community-based mitigation and the gender politics of community reconstruction are left largely unexamined. To the degree that how we think about hazard and risk influences disaster practice, this is a serious loss.

CAPACITIES AND VULNERABILITIES: THE NEED FOR BALANCE

The declaration 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.

Gender relations place women in central roles in disaster, in part because women are particularly subject to environmental risk through urban displacement and

migration, environmental degradation, migration, poverty, and other limits to choice (Shiva 1989, 1995; Reardon 1993; Cutter 1995; Steady 1993; Anderson 1994). Women's paid and unpaid caregiving responsibilities (Abel and Nelson 1990; Finch and Groves 1983; Reskin and Padavic 1994) position them to emotionally and materially sustain kin and community throughout the experiences of disaster and recovery. A gendered division of labor makes many women both frontline responders in the moments of extreme crisis (Dufka 1988) and long-term caregivers to disaster-impacted family members. To the extent possible, women feed people and keep them healthy and strong, reducing their vulnerability to disaster (Bhatt 1995). The relief worker quoted below highlights the continuity between women's routine and crisis work (Bari 1992:58):

Because coping with poverty is tougher for women in general, the aftermath of the cyclone and tidal wave hit them the hardest. Their men may have lost the fishing equipment necessary to earn a living, their children may have died and their homes and belongings were washed away but *at the end of each day it was the wife/mother who had to cook for whoever survived in her family*. In all the relief lines I saw, women stood first. They were the ones collecting bits of wood and bamboo to rebuild the houses. As is customary, they dealt with the sick children and lack of food. (Emphasis added.)

Economic, racial/ethnic, and age stratification make some women needier than others before, during, and after disaster, both among and within cultures. The vulnerability of the single mother, widow, or frail elderly woman is especially evident, reinforcing for disaster managers and the observing public the familiar notion of women as economic and emotional dependents—prototypic disaster victims. As a group, women-maintained households are economically and politically disadvantaged and have acute needs and reduced resources when disaster strikes their homes; they are nonetheless often excluded from official relief programs privileging men as “head of household” (Wiest et al. 1994; Vaughan 1987; Agarwal 1990; Morrow and Enarson 1996). Women with responsibility for children are likely to experience higher mortality rates in earthquake disasters (Miyano et al. 1991; Parasuraman 1995; Rivers 1982), and their caregiving roles are intensified rather than abandoned during crisis.

As we might expect, the less economic and cultural power women enjoy before an event, the greater their suffering in the aftermath. Low-income women whose earnings are essential for family survival may die in floods when they “choose” to remain in their homes to protect precious livestock or goods. Cultural practices as simple as binding clothing and as complex as purdah put some women at special risk in some disaster events; indeed, simply giving boys more food places girls at greater risk of death in famine disasters (Rivers 1982). Purdah makes women vulnerable not simply because they have less access to male-dominated evacuation shelters but because it enforces women's dependence upon men for advance warning and preparedness information (Ikeda 1995). Cultural norms like the seclusion of women, however, are mediated by caste and class and other factors (Schroeder 1987).

Women's economic vulnerability is often extreme, making them especially dependent upon disaster relief; but power differentials of gender, age, marital status, and family structure, as well as access to transportation and freedom from dependent care, profoundly affect who ultimately accesses and reaps the benefits of assistance programs (Begum 1993; Khondker 1996; Agarwal 1990; Vaughan 1987; Hossain et al. 1992). In a global economy that increases poverty among women, disaster recovery can be especially difficult for girls and women. Ironically, disaster mitigation programs can further exacerbate women's economic dependence if not carefully evaluated for gender impacts (Eade and Williams 1995).

Our Hurricane Andrew studies illustrated many of these points (Enarson and Morrow 1997). Women's caregiving roles expanded dramatically at all stages of disaster response and, though often invisible to disaster responders, women's formal and informal networks were central to both household and community recovery. Women's economic losses were often invisible as homeworkers, in the informal economy, and through secondary unemployment, such as domestic workers displaced from the destroyed homes of their employers. Relief and recovery assets reaching a household could not be assumed to be shared equitably among the people living together. We found that women in traditional relationships with men generally received more help preparing and recovering from disaster than single women maintaining households. We documented women's experiences as workers and applicants in the disaster assistance process, motivating our call for a review and assessment of gender bias in relief agency practices and policies. We found, too, that women with limited English skills were targets for exploitation, for example by landlords or contractors; others were hurt by male desertion and/or misappropriation of relief assets. Some of our informants reported feeling at risk of male violence during the lengthy reconstruction period in disrupted neighborhoods and temporary camps. Overall, low-income women in South Florida were particularly hard hit and slow to recover, especially marginalized women such as public-housing residents, political refugees, migrant workers, and battered women.

But only a partial truth is conveyed by media images of tearful and exhausted mothers struggling to get a bucket of fresh water for their children or standing passively in relief lines. These images may be cynically exploited by agencies to stimulate donations; they also reinforce dualistic notions of women's subordination and male power, for example, in banners directed toward male donors: "mothers and sisters are without clothes, save their honour" (Hena 1992:71). Less self-evident is the instrumental and proactive work of women and the disaster-relevant skills and knowledge developed by women's daily lives. Typecast as hapless victims protected and rescued by vigilant men, women are in fact also present in every disaster response as mitigators, preparers, rescuers, caregivers, sustainers, and rebuilders. Focusing on women's status as dependents in the relief process and excluding them from community recovery and mitigation decision-making is myopic and misguided.

Women farmers in rural societies, for example, are historical resource managers with specialized knowledge of food, fuel, and water, including famine foods and other survival strategies (e.g., Rodda 1991; Jiggins 1986; Steady 1993). Their daily work hones these vital mitigation skills and knowledge. As primary household managers responsible for obtaining, preserving, and distributing food and household supplies, women's taken-for-granted skills help prepare and maintain their households in times of crisis. Women's wage labor and/or informal work is also a vital survival asset for low-income households responding to crisis (Moser 1996). Reconstructing lives takes money and women's economic contributions in woman-maintained and dual-earner families alike is a significant form of recovery taken on by women, including those with no previous earning history.

Many researchers note women's part in assessing and communicating disaster warnings and in evacuation decisions (Turner et al. 1981; Turner et al. 1986; Neal et al. 1982; Drabek 1969). Women's communications skills make them critical integrators of family, extended household, and neighborhood in disaster contexts. A Jamaican Red Cross worker reflects on the strength of women in Caribbean families (Clark 1995:8): "Their voices, though less strong, echo in more places and result in an educated community. Children heed well the warnings of the grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and older female relatives. In the Caribbean, children often use 'my grandmother always said.'"

In affluent as well as developing societies, households impacted by natural disaster often turn to extended family for help (Morrow 1997; Bolin and Trainer 1978; Bolin 1994). This, too, is the disaster work of grandmothers, aunts, daughters, and nieces. Women's "emotion work" is vital to children and dependent elders, spouses and life partners as they come to terms with evacuation, losses, relocation, injury or death, both as experienced family health providers and caregivers and as skilled professionals in education, medicine, and the human and social services (Morrow and Enarson 1996; Enarson and Morrow 1997).

Similarly, women's experience as community workers, informal neighborhood leaders, and social activists equips them to respond to community crisis. When we look in the right places, we see women taking the initiative, calling grassroots community meetings (Akhter 1992) and organizing disaster response coalitions (Enarson and Morrow, Chapter 17, this volume). Though often marginalized in practice, increasing numbers of professional women are employed directly by governmental and nongovernmental organizations responding to disaster (Phillips 1990; Gibbs 1990); other women are highly involved as community workers and organizers in disaster-prone areas (Eade and Williams 1995), including neighborhood-based household preparedness programs (e.g., Faupel and Styles 1993).

To the degree that more integrated and cohesive communities are more disaster-resilient (e.g., Berke et al. 1993), this community work undertaken by women helps mitigate the impact of future disasters and is an important part of "rising from the ashes" toward self-reliance (Anderson and Woodrow 1989). A UNICEF officer based in Africa draws the natural conclusion (Fieth 1995:7): "In any society,

solidarity and community support are usually strongest among women as women are brought together by concern for their children and families. This solidarity saves lives in times of crisis, and should both inform and service effective disaster prevention and mitigation policies.”

That women’s work is devalued for being informal and socially invisible is frequently remarked (e.g., Honeycombe 1994; Dobson 1994) as is the pressure on women to maintain gender boundaries in relief work (Kabir 1992; Akhter 1992). Gender patterns in voluntary disaster response are often noted (e.g., Wenger and James 1994) but rarely seen as reflecting male defense of valued responder roles, for example in this Australian bushfire case (Poiner 1990):

It was apparent that while the fire burned there was always work for men of all ages. It was not a place for women. We worked instead where it was deemed appropriate for us—preparing food in our kitchen, which was already stacked high with mutton and corned-beef sandwiches, pikelets and lamingtons—‘tucker’ made by district women for fire fighters. (p.158)

Women do not go out to fight fires. Excepting the very old, no other category of adults is so completely without participant representation. . . . Thus women are excluded from participation in the forefront of crisis in which social credit attends visibility, although their cooperation and participation is required at a less prestigious level. (p. 172)

Women’s disaster experiences are a mosaic of need and capability as richly textured, intricate, and colorful as women’s many cultures. The ongoing process of documenting how and with what effect gender relations place women at risk must be supplemented by images of women as active community responders.

Exploring the gendered terrain of disasters is a continuing challenge for disaster studies. This collection brings some of the landmark work already done to a broader audience and significantly expands our knowledge base about women and disaster, particularly in developed societies. Other selections raise questions and concerns about unexplored or understudied gender-related dimensions of disaster work. Intriguing, often difficult, issues emerge for practitioners and researchers when we bring a gender lens to the analysis of disaster in human communities. To help us move from critique to action and inspire new initiatives and relationships, we offer a final editorial chapter outlining new strategies in research, organizational practice, and policy.

I

Perspectives on Gender and Disaster

One goal of our collection is to bring together what is currently known about gender and disaster to establish a foundation upon which to promote new perspectives and directions. In the first chapter, Alice Fothergill presents an updated version of her excellent 1996 review of the literature on gender and disasters. Using a typology based on the stages of a disaster event, she synthesizes over 100 studies that have addressed gender issues to some degree. The implications of gender, particularly as it affects women, are discussed in relation to exposure to risk, perception of risk, preparedness behavior, warning communication and response, physical impacts, psychological impacts, emergency response, recovery, and reconstruction. The studies vary widely in methodology, focus, setting, and the extent to which they address gender as a central concept. Fothergill's purpose is not to evaluate individual studies, but to provide a much-needed synthesis of the literature. A picture emerges that extends beyond the mere contrast of sex differences to reveal patterns of inequality associated with women's status that are not well understood, particularly in the context of disaster. Fothergill calls for new approaches, such as more in-depth qualitative work, and new perspectives, such as bringing feminist theory to bear on the issues.

In the second chapter, Robert Bolin, well known for his pioneering focus on the effects of ethnicity, class, and age on disaster vulnerability and response, is joined by Martina Jackson and Allison Crist to develop a strong critique of the neglect of gender in U.S. disaster work. Using examples from the extensive international body of work on famine, they develop a compelling argument that gender inequality, along with other forms of domination and exclusion, leads to socially produced vulnerabilities that have been largely ignored in mainstream disaster work. Moving beyond oversimplified sex role explanations, they call for a perspective that examines how gender stratification and conflict affect disaster experience at all levels, from larger societal processes to the distribution of resources within families.

In Chapter 3 Joseph Scanlon extends the argument by illustrating how gender-related misinformation has impeded disaster response and practice. He argues that persistent myths have resulted in women being treated, not just differently, but inappropriately, at every level of disaster response. Using examples from throughout the field, he illustrates how the contributions of women have been consistently ignored or discounted, to the detriment of effective disaster response. The expanding role of women as professional disaster responders, however, raises new questions as both men and women are faced with changing family conditions, including new family and work conflicts in times of crisis.

Together, these authors lay the groundwork for a new gendered sociology of disaster that begins with a better understanding of how patriarchal social processes disadvantage women and underutilize their resources, and moves toward a more inclusive, and thus stronger, disaster theory and practice.