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Gender Equality and Natural Disasters

Literature Review and Practical Actions for Improving Equality in Disaster Events and Recovery

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The effect of natural disasters on women is great, and there are opportunities for improving gender equality in disaster preparation, relief, and recovery. I start with an overview of selected topics and terminology in gender studies on which subsequent sections will rely. A discussion of gender and development is included because it is more widely studied than is gender and disasters, and there are many commonalities. I then look at how disasters relate to gender, with specific examples, and give a critical review of the current literature on the topic. A conclusion is given with practical considerations for implementing a gender-sensitive approach in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), focusing on transformation within the agencies that work in DRR.

Towards an Understanding of Gender and Empowerment

This paper focuses on the ways which women are disadvantaged in a disaster context and how they can be specifically incorporated into DRR. However, a truly comprehensive analysis of disasters and gender would include non-conforming genders and transgendered people. Some of the considerations and conclusions in this paper could also be extended to the trans population, and others would not be directly applicable. Transgendered people face unique challenges in natural disaster preparation, events, and recovery. If at all it is concluded that the effect of natural disasters on women needs further study, even more can the same be concluded for transgender people. The inclusion of all voices is needed in the disaster planning and mitigation, especially those voices that are currently not heard. This extends to all genders, sexualities, races, etc., though such a comprehensive analysis is not within the scope of this paper. I recognize that the paper is unfortunately, not entirely inclusive in its analysis. I focus on women because as a white, straight, economically privileged female in the development field, I am more acutely aware of how femaleness plays out in development and more recently, disasters than I am of the effects of race, sexuality, or economic status. This is a classic definition of privilege- that those who have it are largely unaware. This connects to the challenge (and opportunity) of involving men.

Some argue that there is an "inherent contradiction" in involving men in gender equality programs, because it has "the aim to 'empower men to dis-empower themselves'" (Bradshaw, 2014). However, that relies on the assumption that empowerment is a zero-sum game. A zero-sum game is one in which the benefits or winnings are static. As much as one person wins is equal to the amount the other person losses. It is easy to imagine gender equality in development as a zero-sum game. The very word *empowerment* contains the word "power", so doesn't empowerment mean a shifting of power from one group to another? However, most contemporary gender theorists and activists do not consider gender equality to be a zero-sum game. Most believe that everyone wins when women are empowered. Even mainstream institutions that work in disaster relief such as the World Bank recognize the mutual gains of equality, even if the main argument is economic rather than inherent worth and capability. Even if some definitions of empowerment actually are zero-sum, the term liberation or freedom from previous limitations based on gender, or the terms gender equality and gender equity do not carry the same likelihood of being considered zero-sum.

Equality is an equal distribution of resources and opportunities. This would be a world in which men and women are equally affected by disaster and receive equal opportunities to participate in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), for example. *Equity* is fairness, including a provision to set right the current and historic inequalities. Equity is part of the process to achieve equality. Equitable response in a disaster context might be that more funding is given to projects that equip women, due to the current understanding that women are more affected by disasters.

Gender and Development

The movement labeled Women in Development (WID) provides extra resources for women and tries to involve women in already-existing processes and structures. Such attempts at gender-sensitive development often provide resources that are in line with traditional or local gender roles. Examples include health training focused on childcare, small business development to sell locally-sourced beauty products, or providing water to girls at school so that they can bring some home at the end of the day. Such methods of engendering development are the norm, but can “reinforce rather than challenge gender relations” (Bradshaw, 2014).

The subsequent movement is called Gender and Development (GAD). It recognizes that women and men are both critical actors in equitable development. It also goes beyond just involving women in the current structures and programs. Rather than just providing incentives for girls to attend school, for example, it “focuses on challenging the social norms that keep girls from attending school” (Bradshaw, 2014). It places the strategic interests of women as the goals of a program that is trying to serve those women.

In GAD approaches, there can be projects that are focused specifically on men as well, because gender equity relies on the involvement and awareness of everyone. Gender equality programs for men and boys are often successful in improving gender equality, thereby having a positive impact on women as well. One critique of masculinity projects is that “they reinforce men as self-reflecting subjects and complex individuals, yet the ‘Third World woman’ remained positioned as an object of subordination, not least since women rarely have the luxury to reflect on their ‘femaleness’...” (Bradshaw, 2014). However, many social science studies find that men think and talk less about gender (Davis, 2006), which aligns with a core principle of privilege as described in the previous section.

Unequal Distribution of Disaster Risk

It is widely accepted that women are disproportionately affected by disasters (United Nations, 2015b). Part of this may be due to who has access to information and participation in preparation activities- that women faced by a disaster risk do not know what to do or where to go. Another part is that social norms may dictate that they need permission to leave the home, or that they care for the elderly or children, which makes evacuation a slower process for women (Bradshaw, 2014).

Disaster risk is divided into intensive risk and extensive risk. Intensive risks are major and rare, whereas extensive risks are minor but more frequent. It is widely documented that natural disasters disproportionately affect females, with examples coming from both types of risk.

Intensive risks can often affect women more than men. For example, female fatalities during a cyclone in Bangladesh outnumbered male fatalities 14:1 (World Bank, 2011), explained in part because men were taught how to swim more than females were. In various regions of Bolivia, during both drought and floods increased the incidence of physical, sexual, and verbal/emotional domestic abuse faced by women (Roosta, 2012).

Extensive risks are also likely to affect women more than men. “Extensive risks are responsible for most disaster morbidity and displacement, and represent an ongoing erosion of development assets” (United Nations, 2015a). After typhoons in the Philippines, female infant mortality was higher than male infant mortality (Antilla-Hughes, 2014). Women are more likely to die earlier in low-income areas previously affected by disasters (Bradshaw, 2014). And it seems that in every major disaster globally, cases of

human trafficking and/or sexual abuse are reported to have increased. These are problems that disproportionately affect women.

Extensive risk in low and middle income countries are increasing. Similarly, extensive risks affect those who are already more vulnerable. Given that extensive risks are increasing, and that even now they are often underestimated (United Nations, 2015a), it is possible that unequal effect of disasters on women more than men is more pronounced than we understand and will become even more pronounced with time.

Changes in Gender Equality as a Result of Disasters

Any shock to a society can concentrate power (Klien, 2007), decreasing equality and making the poor even poorer (Mutter, 2015). Disasters are theorized to magnify the differences and inequalities that were already in existence before. If women are already disadvantaged and more vulnerable, disaster may serve to shift even more power to the gender that already has it (men) and cause development to take steps backwards in the “empowerment” metrics and discourse.

If “only a crisis... produces real change” (Friedman, 1961) it is important to encourage discourses and trends towards gender equality before a disaster, so that it has the potential of becoming the new normal after a disaster?

Theory suggests that disasters increase power gaps previously present, and studies show that women bear more burden of disaster impacts. However, there is a lack of conclusive studies that show long-term impacts of natural disasters on gender inequality. Gender equality is increasing worldwide, though the world continues to have “shocks” such as natural disasters, war, etc. Perhaps disasters magnify gender inequality so that it can be more clearly seen, but do not in the long term exacerbate the problem. If that is the case, then disasters (including preparation and recovery) become an opportunity to address the underlying societal imbalances that had always been present but were unacknowledged.

Some consider disasters to be a “window of opportunity” for working towards gender equity. Others would say that societal imbalances are not of the utmost importance in life or death scenarios. With that perspective, existing gender roles would be relied upon as a means to most efficiently implement recovery efforts.

There is a gap in the literature proving that the theorized window of opportunity actually exists: there is little proof that programs that provide resources to women after a disaster have a long-term effect on their well-being. She concludes that what is important is not whether gender-sensitive DRR is in place, but *how* it is enacted that is important (Bradshaw, 2014).

Gender in DRR Literature

Many comprehensive discussions about disaster preparation, relief and recovery at least mention gender, even if the recommendations are vague. Lessons learned from the period of the Hyogo Framework for Action included that “governments should engage with relevant stakeholders, including women” (United Nations, 2015b).

The Sendai framework became a little more specific, stating that “women and their participation are critical to effectively managing disaster risk and designing, resourcing and implementing gender-sensitive

disaster risk reduction policies, plans and programmes; and adequate capacity building measures need to be taken to empower women for preparedness as well as to build their capacity to secure alternate means of livelihood in post-disaster situations,” (United Nations, 2015b).

However, a major aspect that I saw missing in Sendai is the importance of gender and age disaggregated data (GADD). This is a simple step that is critical for building our understanding of how disasters are related to gender.

Even practical sounding documents such as “Key Recommendations for Gender Equality Mainstreaming in Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Response: Lessons from the earthquakes in Nepal” (UNOCHA, 2015) only provide basic points such as: ensure that data is gender and age disaggregated, collaborate with women’s groups, and “re-think financial mechanisms”. Vague suggestions have been around for decades, and are not helpful for practitioners or policy-makers. If there have been lessons learned in Nepal, more helpful would be providing specific failure and success stories of attempting to implement those recommendations.

Examples of Gender in DRR Practice

There are gaps between recommendations in current literature regarding gender, and current practices in DRR, aid and recovery. Though it is widely documented that women bear an unequal burden of disaster risk, gender is not prioritized in DRR. This incongruity has for many years been discussed at the International Conferences on Gender and Disaster. But the practice of mainstreaming gender lags behind the knowledge that it needs to be done. Involving women in DRR has seen very slow progress, but more advancement has been made towards involving women in reconstruction (Bradshaw, 2014).

Examples abound of places where and events when women have taken the lead in aspects of disaster recovery. Plan International reports that in many areas of Nepal, women have been central in recovery from earthquakes in 2015. Many men work outside of the country, so the women who are left to manage affairs at home. This places a larger burden of disaster effects on the women, but also positions them as critical actors in recovery. They are the ones who know the needs and also the resources available, and rely on networks with other women to coordinate care and economic productivity (Lomelin, 2016).

Many disaster relief workers and agencies have found the benefit of relying the unique capabilities and knowledge of women. In evacuation in Montserrat, women were able to give authorities detailed information of the location of every home in a community, including the number of men, women and children who lived in each one (Lucas, 2010).

Specific Considerations for Implementation

What can be done in preparation, relief and recovery efforts to reduce the impacts of a disaster on gender inequality? As we have seen already, there are still aspects that are not well understood. An important first step is to have disaster reporting use Gender and Age Disaggregated Data.

In the disaster preparation stage, it is important that there is equitable access to information about what to do in case of an emergency.

As for disaster relief and recovery, examples such as those given in this paper can be built upon. An important aspect is continued study and evaluation of gender-sensitive approaches. It is important to understand the untold stories, such which effects of a natural disaster may effect men more than women.

In order to design gender-sensitive programs for women and men, one must be conscious of what assumptions are being made about gender-based roles. Are women's needs only related to the house and family? Are men's needs assumed to be related to their role as provider and protector? Only offering programs that help men and women with their pre-determined roles can actually have a long-lasting detrimental effect, because it can more deeply entrench limiting and unequitable roles, responsibilities, and opportunities.

Gender mainstreaming requires transformation "not only of women's lives, but also of the agencies and institutions that make the policies that affect their lives." (Bradshaw 2014, pS65). This requires each individual person in these institutions to "mainstream" gender thinking in their own lives, though that process can be encouraged and instigated by the initiatives within the institution for which they work. For this to happen, an analysis of gendered power relations is critical both within the institutions and between all actors involved in disaster preparation and recovery.

Poor choice of words in the DRR can deepen detrimental stereotypes. Though I have used the word "vulnerable" in this paper, I avoid it where possible. In exploring the literature on gender and disasters, I tired of the word "vulnerable" being used so often for women. It highlights weakness and needs, and draws my attention further away the capabilities of women that can be used in DDR. Instead of saying that women are more vulnerable to disaster risk, it can be explained that women bear greater burdens. Or, that there is an unequal distribution of the effects of a disaster, due to an already unequal society. On a more theoretical and general level: society shifts negative impacts to its already oppressed and disadvantaged members. Words should be sought that empower even as they are spoken. What works in one language and culture will not work universally. The shift away from focusing on women as "vulnerable" is echoed by the Gender and Disasters Network. Rather than focusing on the perceived needs and existing roles of women, the Gender and Disasters Network suggests a focus on the rights and capabilities of women.

Finally, "equity is best acquired through processes that model equity" (Davis, 2016). Therefore, programs and funding should exist for both men and women. However, recall the distinction between equity and equality described early in this paper. In order to achieve gender equality, gender equity can be used as a tool, which considers the historical and current inequalities. So in order to achieve true equality, funding could be focused larger towards the currently disadvantaged genders- women and non-conforming. However, both gender-specific support and opportunities to reflect on gender should be offered to all. Reflection on gender and gender roles may be a low-hanging fruit in disaster preparedness and long-term recovery, at least in terms of funding. "Reflective space does not need funding to emerge. One of the clear messages from the Civil Rights movement is that consciousness and reflection can emerge" even when financial resources are limited (Davis, 2016).

Some feel that the luxury for women to reflect on gender is "less accessible when men's projects compete for limited funding from the gender funding pot" (Bradshaw, 2014). This assumes that empowerment is a zero-sum game, discussed at the beginning. It also pits women against men in the access to resources. Given the example of the Civil Rights movement, less funding available for "women's projects" does not mean that women can reflect less on femaleness. Funding for "men's projects" is beneficial for women, moving towards the same goals as directly reconsidering femaleness. For example, when women discover new strengths, such as the ability to plan for disasters, provide for family members and friends in new ways, or take leadership within a community, is easier to incorporate those strengths into their lives if

men have also come to the point where their own masculinity doesn't depend on women being weaker/subordinate. Therefore, it is important to develop DRR that is sensitive and targeted to both men and women.

A simple transaction or transition, shifting resources from women to men, will not achieve gender equality. New tools are needed, for “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lourde, 2007) All genders must be seen as allies to each other in the quest for gender equality, shifting from blame and dualism to accountability and cooperation (Hook, 2008). How can accountability as understood in that context be incorporated into gender-sensitive disaster response? How are the aid organizations accountable to people affected by disasters as it relates to gender? Instead of relying on old “tools,” it is suggested that we learn “how to take our differences and make them strengths” (Lourde, 2007). This recommendation is especially applicable to disaster risk reduction, as we seek to recover from disasters, aid all individuals who have been affected, and prepare in order to reduce losses in the future.

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