

# Gender Concerns of Recovery-Reconstruction



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## Introduction

Although disasters do not discriminate, their impacts could be perceived as discriminatory. This is because the degree of the negative impact of disasters depends, to an extent, upon economic and social status of those affected. During rapid-onset disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, casualties among richer households who live in well-made houses are less than among the poorer ones living in less sturdy structures. That is why, 95 per cent of disaster-related deaths occur among the 66 per cent of the world's population that live in the poorer countries.

Disasters directly or indirectly disrupt the daily lives of people, giving rise to new conflicts, new burdens and also new opportunities. The better the access to resources—finance, social network, influence, information, assets and so on, the more resilience people develop to calamities. Thus, any disaster would hit the young and old, rich and poor, men and women alike, but the impact is felt differently by different sections.

Existing gender-based inequalities tend to put women at a disadvantage in terms of the capability to withstand disasters and their impacts

Considering the scale of the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, and its reverberations across different sectors and sections, it is an imperative to analyse the implications of the disaster and reconstruction on women.

Literature shows that women suffer more during disasters but the suffering is less visible. This charts out the importance of giving specific attention to women and children during such times. Fortunately, in response to the Gorkha Earthquake, state and humanitarian agencies involved in relief and recovery activities tried to address gender-related issues from the beginning. The reconstruction activities are not only important in the context of efforts towards building a safe, resilient and prosperous Nepal but also because every disaster provides opportunities which could be used for the benefit of women.

## Impact differential

Socially imposed roles and prohibitions on women are responsible for the differentiated impact they have to bear. Women often undertake three roles—reproduction, production and community management. Reproduction refers to domestic roles of nurturing the family, performing household chores and foraging for fuel etc. Production refers to income-generating activities. The community management role is related to voluntary works that women undertake to manage community resources for collective consumption, and, many times, it is extension of their reproductive role.

It is notable that the reproductive and community management roles are voluntary, unpaid and considered to be primary activities of women—thus, invisible. Given these roles, women are forced to face different kinds of vulnerabilities that men usually do not. In addition, women have less access to or control over resources which means increased social vulnerability and deprivation of the capacity to cope with hazardous events.

## Fatalities

The 2015 Gorkha Earthquake killed more females than males—56 per cent of the casualties were women. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Report (PDNA) published by the Government of Nepal has pointed out their need to stay indoors as a cause of the higher

number of female deaths. Women were delayed, while escaping, by the need to rescue their children, older family members and valuables.

Moreover, women are not safe from premature death even after the disaster is over. Studies have found that in societies where the socio-economic status of women is low, natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women than of men.

## Loss of livelihood and means

PDNA assessed that women lost approximately NPR 15 billion to the earthquake, considering their higher engagement than men in the agriculture sector—farming and livestock. Similarly, a report published by Nepal Development Research Institution found a higher number of women headed post-disaster households living with minimal income due to losses of agriculture income and livestock.

Further, working for or owning micro and small enterprises are the major source of non-farm income for women. According to the PDNA estimates, about 50 per cent of all household-based and micro enterprises in the affected districts sustained complete or partial damage to premises, machinery, tools and equipment. In addition, the increased household work burden, due to damages to domestic and social infrastructure, also increased their time-poverty. This further contracted their potential for wage-earning employment.

Disaster not only destroys existing income source of the women, it increases women's dependency on family members. Worse, desperate situation may even force them to engage in transactional sex work.

## Sexual and physical violence

According to a study by International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, domestic and sexual violence increases following disasters. Cases of sexual assaults and harassments were widely reported in the temporary camps that offer scant privacy. The breakdown of social order in the aftermath of disasters and the helplessness of female survivors tend to embolden men. The Inter-Cluster Gender Task Force (ICGTF) had estimated that approximately 40,000 women living in the post-quake temporary camps to be at immediate risk of violence.

Women living in temporary shelters in various affected districts have recounted increased instances of threats of violence. Increased alcohol consumption among men was reported as the reason for the escalated threat. Families with young women living in temporary camps feared sexual abuse, especially when

Women have less access to or control over resources leading to increased social vulnerability and deprivation.

there were reports of rapes and assaults in the shelters. Anecdotal cases of husbands forcing themselves on wives while living in the tents have also emerged. Police did make arrests in cases of rapes and attempted rape, inside Kathmandu Valley shelters in the first few months of the disaster. Prolonged reconstruction delays have forced many households to continue to live in tents, meaning that women have to bear the violence and threat of violence for longer periods.

### ***Vulnerability to trafficking***

In impoverished areas, the disaster also increased the danger of trafficking of women and girls for sex work. Following the 2015 earthquake, the number of trafficking cases increased, as per National Human Rights Commission of Nepal. Besides, men were also found to have coerced women and girls into sex, in exchange for basic commodities or money, preying on the affected women's desperation. Trafficking is not limited to trafficking for sex work, women are also being voluntarily trafficked to Gulf countries to work as housemaids, where they are exposed to different types of abuses.

### ***Sexual, reproductive health concerns***

Availability of reproductive healthcare in Nepal has never been sufficient. The earthquake destroyed whatever healthcare infrastructure was present in the affected areas further constraining access. The damages not only disrupted the services but also suspended other services like anti-retroviral therapy, family planning and management of sexually transmitted infections. Disruptions in reproductive healthcare heightened fears of increased unsafe abortions, maternal mortality and unwanted pregnancies.

Given the communal living in temporary shelters, many women and girls found maintaining menstrual hygiene a challenge. In such scenarios, dignity kits containing clothes, reusable sanitary pads, innerwears, towel, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, nail clipper and flashlight, distributed by humanitarian agencies were quite useful. The impact on sexual and reproductive health due to damages to healthcare centres was temporary as the government was able to rebuild many service centres within six months of the earthquake.

### ***Access to relief***

Women have generally found it difficult to access the relief materials provided by different organizations and the government grants to earthquake victims. This could be because they lack:

- a) **Mobility:** Women were unable to collect the distributed relief materials like food and clothing

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as they could be busy with household work, taking care of children or elderly people. Pregnant women and elderly women had even less mobility.

- b) **Awareness:** Because of limited mobility, they may not be aware of the distribution of relief materials, government compensation etc.
- c) **Capacity:** Later, they could not claim the government provided-benefits due to lack of essential documents like land ownership certificate, citizenship certificate etc. Without citizenship certificates, many women were unable to open the bank account, which was mandatory for cash transfers.

### ***Psychosocial impact***

Trauma and stress caused by disasters are noted to cause depression, sleeplessness and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Moreover, the loss of social support that women usually have during 'normal' times may also prevent women from recovering.

Many cross-cultural studies show that women most commonly suffer more depression and anxiety than men do following a disaster. And, victims of sexual, physical and emotional abuse from intimate partners are forced to bear in silence such forms of violence considering it to be part of the relationship. Emigration among male members of the family has further put undue stress upon unprepared women.

### ***Recovery through gender lens***

In patriarchal cultures, women are considered dependent members to be taken care of by men in the family—be it the father, the husband or the son. Thus, women are less prepared and less knowledgeable about the ways of dealing with disasters. Despite these constraints, women are found to be resourceful and courageous in the face of disasters and, often, 'heroic'.

When rescue and relief give way to recovery and rebuilding, surviving women are left more vulnerable and neglected. For women, disasters mean loss of productive assets, such as cattle, poultry and even kitchen utensils leading to increased dependency on male family members. Thus, it is far more difficult for women to bounce back to the pre-disaster 'normal'. A gender-blind outlook of the policy-setters, partially

because relief and aid distribution is targeted to the entire population, fails to factor in the gender differences. It has been noted that most disaster relief efforts are managed and controlled exclusively by men leading to neglect of women's needs and, many times, their competencies in these matters. It is, therefore, essential to look into planning, policy setting and implementation of reconstruction activities from the gender perspective. Otherwise, reconstruction and relief works will only augment inequality and ingrain gendered stereotyping.

Fortunately, gender concerns were included in the recovery planning from the very start in Nepal by the government as well as humanitarian agencies. National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management 2009, which governs disaster risk management, attempts to mainstream gender issues in the disaster risk management framework. Natural Calamity Act, 1982 is the legislative provision for addressing disaster relief. But, it does not cover issues related to disaster risk management. Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, 2017 is much more comprehensive and recognizes both risk reduction and management as integral. Similarly, forthcoming National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy and Strategic Action Plan, 2017-2030 is also believed to be incorporating gender concerns in national actions. Despite these attempts, addressing gender and social inclusion concerns would require a stronger legislative framework and an effective enforcement mechanism in place. During the 2015 disaster, the absence of women's representation was conspicuously missing in the relief coordination and decision making committees at the community level.

The PDNA and Post Disaster Recovery Framework (PDRF) documents have tried to mainstream gender concerns while assessing the impact of the disaster and the steps to be taken for reconstruction. UN Women contributed in gender mainstreaming in PDNA, which includes a separate chapter on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). Each sector analysis does not ignore gender concerns. The document has made an effort to provide a gender disaggregated impact assessment to highlight women's requirement of special attention, especially after a disaster.

In order to attain gender-responsive, and socially-responsive reconstruction, PDRF aims to achieve meaningful participation of women, bring out targeted, protective and service-oriented programme for women and raise awareness and capacity of women and other vulnerable and marginalized groups. As per recommendation of the PDRF document, NPR 4.6 billion is estimated to be spent over the 2016-2020 period for gender mainstreaming

#### Box 1 | Plight of female headed households

In the aftermath of Gorkha Earthquake, female-headed households (FHHs) were reported to have faced difficulties while accessing relief. Single women and girls feared the most from sexual abuse in the camps and incidences of sexual assault on widowed women or female members of FHHs were not uncommon. Similarly, lack of necessary documents to obtain relief also posed a problem for FHH. Widowed women were found to be four percentage points more likely than others to continue living in shelters for longer period. The worst affected were elderly women who were left alone without any means to support themselves.

and social inclusion. The amount was expected to be spent on establishing a GESI unit at the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA).

Similarly, many humanitarian agencies came together to form a task force to address women specific concerns that could be overlooked during relief and recovery. The ICGTF contributed in preparing gender-responsive PDNA and PDRF documents to guide reconstruction. They created safe spaces for women in the temporary camps, provided psychosocial and legal counselling, and helped deal with hygiene and sanitation issues. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) formed a core group to draft and submit 'Common Charter of Demands by Women's Groups in Nepal for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the Post-Disaster Humanitarian Response'. The charter deals with gender sensitive recovery policies that address women specific practical and strategic needs.

A few basic services women require are: a place where they can sleep without fear, unobstructed flow of information regarding where and how to access necessary amenities and materials—be it free of cost or otherwise—and means of livelihood. Hopefully, the local bodies would be prepared better in future to help the affected households in accessing these services.

Construction of shelters can be expensive and cumbersome. In order to help women meet the eligibility criteria for the housing reconstruction grant, a mechanism to provide legal and technical counselling at the local level is necessary. The media, especially radio programs, have emerged effective here.

The earthquake has increased time-poverty among women. The loss of property in the earthquake also makes it necessary for them to be financially capable. Humanitarian organizations, NGOs and other international non-government organizations (INGOs)

## Box 2 Case Study of Rasuwa

The Rasuwa-Kerung border point has come into greater focus since August 2015. The earthquake destroyed the existing Tatopani customs point in Sindhupalchowk, which was, until then, the only land trading point between the two countries. The Rasuwagadi point has been witnessing increased movement of goods and tourists. The earthquake has had a positive impact on the population of Rasuwa as opportunities for livelihood have increased. Trading activities, tourism and activities related to hydropower projects in the district keep many people busy. Small tea shops or restaurants or even homestay arrangements for tourists or businesspersons are the usual openings for them. Moreover, increased land prices in the area have also contributed in bringing prosperity to the people of Rasuwa by making their assets more liquid.

However, hustle and bustle at the border has also increased the vulnerability of women as there are increased risk of sexual exploitation. Travelling across the border for women is risky mostly because they are unaware of Chinese laws against sexual harassment and also due to language barriers. Therefore, while growth in women's employment opportunities could promote their economic independence there could also be a social cost attached.

offered cash-for-work programs and skill trainings for income generating activities, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This helped them survive during the most difficult times.

Given the colossal need for skilled labour for reconstruction, women have increasingly taken up jobs of masonry and carpentry, which were considered an exclusive domain of men. Training more women in the sector would not only aid in expediting the rebuilding process, but also the means of earning a sustainable income well, after the reconstruction activities are over.

However, providing women with trainings is not sufficient to make them financially independent. An environment that supports micro entrepreneurship through easier credit financing and facilitating their access to the market could be equally necessary. Women may not be able to engage in employment for income due to their childcare duties. It is advisable to divert some focus on providing community-led childcare services allowing mothers to earn, which may also prevent young girls from dropping out of school to care for their younger siblings.

Empowering women by making them self-reliant is a step towards preventing others from taking undue advantage from women's helpless situation. Psychosocial counselling to both women and men will be important to help them deal with the difficulties.

In desperate times, women are more vulnerable to falling prey to sexual abuses and trafficking. Women need to be made aware of the possible risks while providing them with support when they need help. In this regard, many women-focused NGOs have done exemplary services. Nepal Police have also deployed officials trained to handle gender-sensitive issues. The increased number of cases of violence reported after the earthquake signals that many women felt empowered enough to report those incidents.

Sexual and reproductive health care services were hit by the disaster, but the government did make efforts towards restoring the damaged healthcare centres. Humanitarian agencies also supported by distributing minimum initial service packages to women in need. Similarly, dignity kits helped women and girls cope with their immediate hygiene needs.

Losing family members or means of livelihood while being forced to relocate does have a lasting impact on mental health. NGOs and INGOs involved in providing psychosocial counselling have helped women to overcome their difficulties. Providing such support to men is also beneficial as they too struggle to overcome impact of disasters.

Delays in reconstruction of damaged infrastructures, such as healthcare, education and public facilities, are an added pressure on women. The pace of reconstruction of the infrastructure is as slow as the pace of private housing reconstruction. The delays have meant increased drudgery for women.

### Towards gender-sensitive recovery

Since men and women are not impacted by disasters in the same manner, a conscious attempt is necessary to make reconstruction efforts gender-responsive. It is very important to integrate gender considerations while preparing a strategy to combat disaster or for relief, rescue and rehabilitation. The gender perspective must come out during implementation as well.

In this regard, the government effort to maintain gender disaggregated data is laudable. Now, data has shown that women's death toll was higher than men's and women have also lost their income generating opportunities. However, the government does not seem to have based its policy decisions on data.

NRA was formed with the objective of carrying out post-earthquake rebuilding activities. It's executive committee has no representation of women. The government should have made significant effort to make such an important body gender-inclusive. Some may argue that it is not necessary to have women to

address gender concerns, but without representation there is always a risk of the issues being pushed to the shadows. Again, including women members alone does not make policies gender inclusive, especially if they are not allowed to influence policies and decisions. The problem was rectified to a certain extent with the formation of NRA's GESI Division, but, it came very late—almost one and half years after the earthquake—and the action plan is still not ready.

Too many humanitarian agencies were working on similar programs such as cash-for-work and trainings to impart skills. Here, coordination is needed among humanitarian agencies to avoid duplication of work.

Women must be partners in all mitigation and risk reduction initiatives as well as in recovery planning. Instead of imposing these policies with a top-down approach, it is highly advisable that these gender-responsive activities be integrated through households and communities. Disaster mitigation guides must be gender-aware in text, tone, substance and communication. Nepal has already endorsed Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030). The framework emphasizes on women's participation as critical to effectively managing disaster risk. The new Disaster Management Act has tried to incorporate these considerations. It can be expected that the legislative framework will help adopt these principles in practice as well.

Reconstruction should be taken as an opportunity to streamline gender concerns at the community level. For example, housing reconstruction can help incorporate female-friendly designs. Likewise, safe spaces for women should be established. This is not only important in the context of the effort towards building a safe, resilient and prosperous Nepal, but this could also be an opportunity to introduce various other interventions for women's economic, social and political empowerment.

Reconstruction can also be a chance to carry out gender sensitivity programmes in order to prevent the rising Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

cases and respond to activities like trafficking, rape and other abuses. Girls and women need to be made aware of the possible risks they face and the legal and administrative course that they must take when abused.

Livelihood opportunities need to be enhanced with various programmes and activities and these should specifically target women. Skill development programmes for women give them increased opportunities for livelihood. To include more women in the workforce, women should be provided basic trainings on skills, which is on high demand at present, such as masonry, carpentry, and so on. Similarly, steps should be taken to aid home-based workers, the majority of whom are women. They have lost their livelihood along with their houses in the earthquake. Programmes and policies, such as easy access to credit, to help them get back to their feet could be of great help.

Investment is required to meet all these needs. GESI activities have been allocated an estimated budget of NPR 4.6 billion which is a mere 0.55 per cent of the total estimated budget for reconstruction. Therefore there is a need to revise this budget as this may not be enough to carry out all the plans and programmes.

This is also an opportunity to advocate the need to have necessary documentation so that people can easily access the facilities provided by the government or follow any legal course for the purpose. Ensuring people's legal identity can facilitate their specific rights and corresponding duties (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—cross cutting goal 16.9).

Above all, promoting gender equality is a priority for most of the countries in the world and Nepal is no exception. The commitment to achieve SDG-3, i.e. promoting gender equality and empowering women, is a challenge. Thus, these activities would not only address the concerns arising from the disaster, but would also contribute towards achieving the larger goal of women's empowerment. ■