

What's Gender "Got to Do With It"??*

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We begin this special issue by addressing some anticipated questions. What does gender have to do with disasters? Is it really that relevant to the work I do? Are men and women that different? (So, maybe that one you don't question.) But is gender really germane to the disaster-related work I do? How can the articles in this special issue help me?

For those who might dismiss this special issue as reflecting "political correctness," we offer an alternative view: the advocates, supporters, and contributors to this endeavor share a commitment to promoting a better understanding of vulnerabilities and capacities as they are affected by societies stratified by gender, age, disability, income, and race. Through our research, professional and community work, and activism, our goal is to influence the practice of emergency and disaster management in ways that result in safer and more humane communities — for everyone.

Disaster researchers are accumulating clear evidence that, as a group, women are likely to respond, experience, and be affected by disasters in ways that are qualitatively different. At the same time it is important to recognize and document women's diversity. Clearly, not all women experience disasters

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uniformly. The experience of a white, middle-class professional woman in a Texas town hit by a disaster will be vastly different from that of a sub-Saharan woman in seclusion, or a disabled Brazilian elder. Privilege is relative to one's location in a given set of social, economic, political, and even religious circumstances, of which gender is only one factor, albeit a major one. Attending to the specific context in which a woman experiences a disaster (time, place, and circumstance) deepens explanations and provides routes for addressing the inequities cited in this volume. In other words, it's not simply the recognition of a male-female differential, but a deeper understanding of how gender relates to the complex interplay of power, resources, privilege, and stratification that will increase the effectiveness of the work we do.

A few examples of the effects of gender differences in disaster results should suffice. In a study of two Soviet earthquakes, Beinlin (1981, p. 143) reported that 18 percent of those who died were men, 47 percent were women, and 35 percent were children, giving the explanation that "women and children on their own find it more difficult to escape." Rivers (1982, p. 265) found that women experienced higher morbidity and mortality in famine situations, "the most important element of sex discrimination in [famine] disasters relates to the nutritional vulnerability of female children." Rivers (1982, p. 265), reporting on triage relief stratified by sex and age, provides this quote: "[S]top all this rubbish, it is we men who shall have the food, let the children die, we will make new children after the war." Using a "stampede" at a rock concert as one example, Johnson (1987a; 1987b) draws a clear picture of the persistence of male advantage, even under desperate, life-threatening conditions. The context of any given disaster, including its nature and timing, will affect the gender-specific death rate, but the general pattern of discrimination and segregation of women and girls tends to place them at a disadvantage throughout the disaster response cycle. The evidence is clear (see Fothergill 1996 for an overview of the literature).

Any effort to achieve a true "culture of prevention" (*Stop Disasters* 1995) must address societal inequalities, whether related to gender, age, race, disability, or some other measure, and seek to engage all sectors of the community in mitigation efforts. Through our research and practice we are not likely to change fundamentally what is unjust in our societies, but we can recognize and address patterns of disadvantage which are likely to affect disaster resistance and response. At the same time, our work will benefit from the contributions of the previously disenfranchised. We offer this special issue as one step toward that goal.

It is our privilege to work with a growing cadre of disaster researchers and responders who are dedicated to documenting the experiences of women—their proactions and contributions, as well as reactions and needs. To this end we are pleased to serve as editors for this special collection on women and disaster as viewed from a variety of disciplines, professions, and perspectives, both theoretical and practical.

Gendered Roles: Vulnerabilities and Strengths

Cultures, communities, and families world-wide organize their social lives around gendered principles that influence disaster experiences as well as community and organizational responses. And while your community may seem to be "different" — to have women in positions of responsibility, for example — who are these women? How powerful are their voices? Do they reflect the diverse demographic make-up of your community? How pervasive are women in the emergency management sector? Are you fully utilizing the resources and talents of that "other half" of the population which is likely to know a great deal about what's going on in your community?

Throughout the world women bear disproportionate responsibility for raising children, caring for the ill, disabled, and elderly, and meeting the family's daily needs. These "female-identified" duties have not lessened appreciably as the economic responsibilities of women have increased in post-modern societies. For example, the average woman in the U.S spends about 20 hours in household tasks in addition to working full-time for remuneration (Robinson 1988; see Hochschild 1989 for further discussion). In developing nations, in conjunction with their household responsibilities, it has been estimated that women spend up to 16 hours daily in agricultural work. Through these daily tasks women acquire knowledge and skills which are at the center of disaster management. As one example:

[W]omen play a vital role as both water suppliers and water managers. It is the women who have knowledge of the location, reliability and quality of the local water sources. They are responsible for collecting water and for controlling its use. (Rodda 1991, p. 51; see also Kabir 1995)

The salience to disaster work of women's family and household responsibilities forms a theme that runs through this collection. On the vulnerability side, as a result of their extensive involvement in, and strong identification with, the near environment, most women will be profoundly affected when their homes and neighborhoods are damaged or destroyed. On the resource side, this should place them at the center of effective disaster response.

The first contribution in this issue is a report from Maureen Fordham on two qualitative studies of women's experiences during floods in Scotland in 1993 and 1994. The analysis focuses on the intersection of gender and social class, illustrating the particularly difficult conditions under which working-class women must continue caring for their families:

They took us down to show us the rooms . . . it was filthy. The bedding, there was cigarette burns all over it, there was urine stains all over it. . . . There were cooking facilities but only at

a certain time. . . . They wouldn't put the heating on. I asked the landlady if she could give us a wee towel, and she said no, they didn't supply towels because the tenants who'd been in were stealing them. . . . Nobody told us that you could go to certain places to get clothing, and things that you needed.

Fordham's work reminds us that, while some things can be generalized to women as a group, we need to document the often powerful ways in which other attributes, such as social class, race, ethnicity, and age, intersect with gender to accentuate the disaster-related problems of some groups, such as poor women.

Housing is of particular importance to women, both practically and emotionally. When homes are damaged or destroyed, women's domestic responsibilities not only continue but likely expand as they care for their families in shelters, damaged homes, and temporary housing, often under very difficult circumstances. In the second paper in this collection, Elaine Enarson uses examples from her work in two regions of the United States to suggest several key patterns or issues for further investigation. To paraphrase a few: conflict was reported between couples over priorities and decisions in household preparation, with women being less likely to delay taking action; government-assisted temporary housing decisions did not reflect the needs of women and children; some women, especially those living alone or heading a household, are at a disadvantage throughout the process, including encountering greater problems in locating affordable temporary or replacement housing; housing loss or disruption severely impacted women's ability to do everyday domestic and caregiving chores as well as many women's ability to continue home-based economic activities in the informal sector; and the lack of housing and safe space put some women at higher risk of violence. On the other hand some women took on non-traditional roles in the housing crisis, and some women organized politically to influence housing policy during the rebuilding phase. Enarson's bottom line is that women's "practical needs and long-range interests" in secure housing should be capitalized on by placing them at the center of emergency and disaster planning, indeed at community development in general.

The relationship between disasters and psychological stress has been fairly well established, and the research focus has now moved toward a better understanding of the factors that influence it. Jane Ollenburger and Graham Tobin studied the psychological effects of a flood in Iowa (U.S.), examining its relationship to various health and social factors. Using a large control group, they found the anticipated gender differences, but, also as expected, all women were not equally affected. Their multivariate analysis revealed women's degree of stress to be associated with a "complex web of factors, including the presence of children, marital status, structure of household unit, age, socio-economic status, health, and the level of social attainment." These factors

interact in a variety of ways to increase the vulnerability of certain women such as minority women in fair to poor health, young single mothers with children, and elderly women living alone.

One advantage enjoyed by women in modern societies is longevity. While the gap is decreasing somewhat, women can expect to live several years longer than men (and longer than their female counterparts in less developed nations). While inarguably a female advantage, the resulting demographics are an aged population that becomes increasingly female. Because of gender-specific economic differences, they also become increasingly poor, resulting in significant numbers of single or widowed elderly women without the physical or economic resources to deal with disasters effectively on their own. This implies that they will be targeted for government assistance, such as loans and grants. In fact, in her analysis of data from the tele-registration program of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after flooding in New Orleans, Louisiana, Cheryl Childers found that, while elderly single-female households were significantly more likely to apply for government loans, they were less apt to be approved. Childers' work represents the first attempt by a researcher to analyze FEMA data. While the work provides useful information related to age and gender differences, the fact that FEMA does not gather demographic data on race and ethnicity limits our power to further understand women's diversity in the disaster context.

Particularly germane to our argument here are the important ways in which the reproductive role of women renders them more vulnerable in times of crisis, pregnancy being the most obvious. Beyond pregnancy, the reproductive health and safety needs of women are important factors that they must take into consideration when making decisions about evacuation or about whether to remain in an isolated neighborhood after a disaster. While we cannot minimize the risk of women from sexual violence or their needs for birth control and other reproductive services, it is the act of mothering that renders them most vulnerable. Women responsible for the care of small children and other dependents are seriously burdened when it comes to disaster-related decisions and activities, returning us to the social creation of women's vulnerability.

Within households women may be doing most of the work, but they are likely to lack power and autonomy. While gender egalitarianism is increasingly professed as an ideal in many societies, the reality in most homes is that men and boys have greater freedom and autonomy and exert important control, not only over women and girls, but over household resources (such as cars and money) and over mobility. Gender stratification and norms can seriously limit the ability of women to make decisions about disaster preparation and evacuation and to access post-disaster resources. Impressionistic accounts from Bangladesh indicate that women under Purdah seclusion norms did not seek

aid or evacuate during seasonal floods (Kabir 1995, p. 5). Poverty further impacts women who are reluctant to abandon possessions to flood waters or theft. Post-flood epidemics impact women and children already made vulnerable through inadequate nutrition and poor health. Unfortunately, this power differential can lead to extreme dominance, even violence. There is growing evidence that incidents of violence against women increase in the period following a major disaster. Alice Fothergill presents case study evidence of the realities faced by some women:

Things were very tense around the house. . . . Karen's husband became more and more angry-at the flood, at the city, at the Corps of Engineers, at his family, and, most of all, at his wife. "He likes things ordered and when things are out of order he doesn't like it. So the flood was a nightmare for him. It's not like his temperament completely changed with the flood, but I definitely do consider us to be a flood casualty. The flood did bring on his anger." Karen assumed that his anger would subside as time passed. . . . Instead, Greg's anger grew with each month following the flood. Indeed, a year after the flood his anger erupted into violence and he began beating Karen.

In another case Fothergill describes a disabled victim of domestic violence who was able to gain inner strength from having faced the loss of her home and property and survived on her own. Clearly, agencies which serve families, including shelters and services for battered women, need to be an integral part of community disaster planning.

The same pattern of male power and privilege found in homes extends to the larger community where women are likely to be instrumental to the success of local volunteer and professional organizations, but rarely hold leadership positions that carry real authority. In those cases where opportunities are increasing, women are likely to face resistance. Exploratory research by Jennifer Wilson suggests some of the challenges facing women who enter the previously male bastion of emergency management:

. . . [W]omen have been told that in order for them to be more accepted in a man's world they have to be more assertive but not aggressive because if you are aggressive you are seen as pushy. . . . If I or other women are in a room full of men who are talking and talking and making decisions but I have some important things to say also then it is sometimes very intimidating to say, "Whoa, wait, what about this" . . . in this field if you are not like that then you might as well not have been in the meeting because they don't let you talk.

At the same time Wilson discusses how changes in the field of emergency

management are opening up new opportunities for women and hold promise for better integration of women's issues in disaster management.

In the community context, the result of gender specific social and cultural differences is that, while women are likely to be strategically placed when it comes to promoting effective disaster mitigation and response, they are not likely to have adequate power and resources to do so. We end this special collection with a *Feedback from the Field* contribution from Richard Krajewski and Kristina Peterson. "Our experience has taught us that women . . . play critically important roles in all aspects of disaster preparedness, response, and mitigation with all types of organizations and groups. We are particularly convinced that non-professional, historically vulnerable, and marginalized women are uniquely equipped to play important organizing and leadership roles." To this end they provide specific suggestions for effectively utilizing the knowledge, skills and leadership of community women in disaster response.

Because an established body of feminist research already exists, the disaster field can avoid classic mistakes: looking for physical differences rather than an understanding of privilege and oppression; focusing on women as a homogeneous group rather than as diverse; pitting male against female when some women possess more privileged statuses than some men; and using individual rather than social structural explanations for vulnerability. The work represented in this special issue is a positive step in a promising direction. These efforts to understand the intersection of gender with class, age, disability, race, and ethnicity move us beyond the anecdotal to documented cases with practical as well as theoretical implications.

Summary

The hope of many disaster researchers is to ultimately contribute to a reduction in the effects of hazards on human populations. Beyond what it tells us about vulnerability, the study of gender in the disaster setting has tremendous potential for learning about change from the individual through the organizational levels. Interestingly, one researcher has observed that, "during crisis, the stratification system weakens . . . the permeable boundaries of roles, the shift from formal credentials to crisis-solving abilities, and the reallocation of resources, including social roles, are all crisis-engendered processes that promote the de-differentiation of gender roles within the family, the labor force, and the political system" (Lipman-Blumen 1982, pp. 186-187). We need to further document these shifts, the conditions that promote them, the groups most likely to be affected, and how they can be extended beyond the immediate aftermath when, in fact, the situation is likely to worsen for many women.

Furthermore, group efforts to overcome crises can be better understood.

After Hurricane Andrew in Florida (U.S.), groups of women came "together to share domestic tasks" and "helped elderly neighbors and friends, either directly or by connecting them with community services" (Morrow and Enarson 1994; 1996). When the area's strongest and financially richest recovery organization excluded them, women formed their own multicultural alliance, overcoming difference to create an effective collective (Enarson and Morrow 1998a). For those interested in reducing inequality, disasters represent an opportunity to improve the circumstances of marginalized persons and groups such as victims of family violence, persons with disabilities, and elderly women needing assistance.

Integrating women from across the spectrum of physical, economic, and social circumstances into the full range of disaster-related activities will result in an increased pool of ideas and talents, fuller consideration of the needs of all citizens, more effective response, and thus quicker household and community recovery. And, ultimately, our households and communities will be more resistant to future hazards.¹

If you wish to learn more about women and disasters, or to join in the discussion, we refer you to several sources of information and networking. A summary of the related literature appeared in Volume 14(1) of this journal (Fothergill 1996). The first collection of international contributions on the topic of gender and disaster is now available (Enarson and Morrow 1998b). As an outgrowth of an informal meeting of interested researchers and practitioners organized at the 1997 Natural Hazards Workshop in Boulder, Colorado, a *Gender and Disaster Network* was established. The 1998 meeting was attended by a diverse group of about 50 women and men of varying backgrounds and careers. Anyone interested in this topic is invited to join the network at its current Web site (www.fiu.edu/orgs/IHC/gender).

As the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction concludes, we offer the articles that follow as a new step into the next century. All of us associated with this special issue on Women and Disasters hope the collection will interest you and will have relevance to your work. *May you find the arguments compelling and the commitment to a better understanding of the disaster-related vulnerabilities and capacities of women contagious.*

Note

1. The Pan American Health Organization (Stop Disasters 1990, as described in Phillips and Neal 1996) has developed a list of suggested activities in which women and their organizations can provide valuable labor and ideas.

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