

Women In Disaster: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Women are influenced differently than men by natural disasters. Thus, nature of vulnerability of people to a natural disaster is a direct function of their gender. Based on feminist perspective, this study focused on gendered impact of natural disasters. It is evident from research studies that disaster hit people but women are much more vulnerable to disaster and specially women of developing countries due to their socio-economic status. Mortality and morbidity rates of women all over the world is higher than that of men and the root cause of that is women's vulnerability.

تلخیص المقالہ

قدرتی آفات سے پیدا ہونے والی تباہ کاریاں عورت اور مرد دونوں پر مختلف طریقوں سے اثر انداز ہوتی ہیں چنانچہ قدرتی آفات سے پیدا ہونے والی تباہ کاریاں براہ راست صنف پر اثر انداز ہوتی ہیں۔ موجودہ تحقیق نسائیت کے نقطہ نظر سے صنف پر قدرتی آفات سے پیدا ہونے والی تباہ کاریوں سے متعلق ہے۔ تحقیق سے ثابت ہوتا ہے کہ قدرتی آفات اور اس کی تباہ کاریاں عورتوں اور مردوں پر اثر انداز ہوتی ہیں لیکن خواتین پر ان کا اثر زیادہ ہوتا ہے خصوصاً ترقی پذیر ممالک کی عورتوں پر ان کی سماجی اور معاشی حیثیت کی وجہ سے۔ ان قدرتی آفات سے پیدا ہونے والی تباہ کاریوں کی وجہ سے خواتین کی شرح اموات اور شرح بیماری پوری دنیا میں مردوں کی نسبت زیادہ ہے اور اس کی بنیادی وجہ عورتوں کی کمزور حالت ہے۔

Introduction

Natural disasters are catastrophic events and can occur as a consequence of the impact of a natural or a human-caused hazard. Natural hazards comprise of phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic activity, landslides, tsunamis and cyclones and other severe storms, tornadoes and high winds, floods, drought etc. Human-caused hazards may be intentional, or accidental, can expose people, ecosystems, flora and fauna to threats. The poor are the most vulnerable to disasters because they have fewer resources and capacity to prevent or cope with the impacts (United Nations, 2002). Disaster is defined as a

serious disruption of the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which exceed the ability of affected society to cope on its own resources (UNDHA, 2001). Disasters can be understood in terms of hazards and people's vulnerability to that hazard (3) (DFID, 2006).

It is evident that disasters, whether due to human action or by nature, have increased in intensity and magnitude during recent years, and they become more destructive and cover larger areas (Delica, 2000). Natural disasters are not purely the result of natural events but the product of the social, political and economic context in which they occur (Morrow & Phillips, 1999).¹ People in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to disasters as they often live in high-risk areas, have lower coping capacities, having limited resources and have limited or no risk cover in the form of insurance or other safety nets. Disasters hit populations differently, depending on their vulnerability (Fothergill, 1996).²

Women and Disaster

The gender-based vulnerability of women to hazards and disasters are well documented by a number of scholars. Disasters are gender blind and hit people (not men and women separately). But women are especially vulnerable in disasters because of their socio-cultural condition and vulnerability. In recent years, the vulnerability of women after disasters caused by natural hazards has been a focal point. An analysis of relief efforts demonstrated that women and other vulnerable groups may be deprived of or even alienated by the very relief efforts that are there to care for them (Miller & Arquilla, 2007).³ In countries, where women's socio-economic status is low vis-à-vis males, they face discrimination, gender division of labour, undernourishment and suffer from reproductive health problems and their level of vulnerability increases during and after disaster. It is very difficult to collect accurate data about deaths during hazards and disasters especially gender-based statistics about victims of disasters is not available, but estimates show that disasters hit women hard, and other vulnerable groups such as children older people and poor population etc.

It is very difficult to collect data about mortality and morbidity during and after a disaster. Gender disaggregated data about disaster victims is negligible and very rare, thus it is difficult to measure the differential impact of natural disasters on women and men. However based on observations and experiences of researchers and those who are working in this field, it can be concluded that women are much more vulnerable victims of natural disasters than males. Many studies have determined that poor women are more vulnerable to natural disasters given socially constructed gender roles and behaviours.

A recent study, which is perhaps the first statistical study, of disasters in 141 countries provided evidence that gender differences in deaths from natural disasters are directly linked to women's economic and social rights. In inequitable societies, women are more vulnerable to disasters; for example, boys are likely to receive preferential treatment in

rescue efforts and both women and girls suffer more from shortage of food and economic resources in the aftermath of disasters (Neumayer & Plumper, 2007). It is also mentioned by United Nations Under-Secretary-General Noeleen Heyzer, saying that "women and children are 14 times more likely to be victims of natural disasters than men in societies where gender inequalities exist" (Heyzer, 2009).

In the 1991 cyclone disaster which killed 140,000 in Bangladesh, 90% of victims were women (Aquilar, 2004).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 80% of all refugees are women and children (Cohen, 1998).⁴ In Bangladesh, the death rate for female refugees was several times higher than males (Toole & Waldman, 1993).⁵ Similarly, during the Dhaka City floods of 1998, women and children were the most severely affected (Rashid, 2000).⁶ In 1999–2000, the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age among Afghan refugees in Pakistan was associated with maternity. Of these women, many encountered barriers to health care and died from preventable causes (Bartlett, et. al., 2002).⁷ Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the mortality rate for women among the displaced population of the eastern coastal district in Sri Lanka was twice that of men (17.5% vs. 8.2%) (Nisikiori et. al., 2006).⁸ More women die than men as the direct and indirect result of natural disasters (Davis et. al., 2005). During the 2006 Tsunami, more women died than men – for example in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, male survivors outnumber female survivors by 3 or 4 to 1 (Davis et. al., 2005). The recent Tsunami that struck the countries along the Indian Ocean is an example of a natural disaster that affected women and men differently. The ratio of female to male deaths in the Tsunami was 3:1. Some of the factors that contributed to such a high mortality rate for women included: amongst the survivors the women were the most vulnerable to social and economic threats along with the men they had been thrust into poverty as well as unemployment but due to their other societal roles such as caring for family members they could not rejoin the limited female workforce as easily as men could rejoin the vast male work force, many were unaccustomed to swimming causing them to drown, and the culturally mandated long hair of women became tangled in the debris also causing them to drown (Carballo et. al., 2005).⁹ Natural hazards and disasters have impact on livelihood of women and the reduction of their share of productive activities in the formal and informal sectors. Women are disadvantaged in two ways.

"Not only do they sustain direct damages or production losses (housing and means of production), but they also . . . lose income when they have to apply themselves temporarily to unpaid emergency tasks and an increased amount of unpaid reproductive work, such as caring for their children when schools are closed . . . Such reproductive work is usually granted a lower status than paid work . . . It is also a continuous job . . . which limits women's mobility and can sometimes

even prevent them from exercising their rights as citizens” (Carballo et. al., 2005).¹⁰

Women and children are particularly affected by disasters, accounting for more than seventy five % of displaced persons. In addition to the general effects of natural disaster and lack of health care, women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems, and increased rates of sexual and domestic violence. Moreover, gender roles dictate that women become the primary caretakers for those affected by disasters – including children, the injured and sick, and the elderly – substantially increasing their emotional and material work load. Women’s vulnerability is further increased by the loss of head of the households; husbands, fathers, brothers and/or livelihoods. Findings from a study on the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone, which 130,000 persons died indicates the same problem. 63 % of the deaths were in the under-ten age group, whereas this age group represented only 35 % of the pre-cyclone population. Similarly, 42 % more females died than males, a pattern which is similar to the 1970 cyclone.... The difference between male and female rates is more pronounced in very young and old age groups. Among children under 5 years of age, the death rate for females was 15 % higher than their male counterparts (Chowdhury et. al., 1993).¹¹

According to official statistics released in mid-November 2005, about earthquake in Kashmir, Pakistan 73,318 people died as a result of the earthquake. However, estimates of fatalities provided by other sources are as high as 87,000. Based on findings of other studies, women made up a larger proportion of the injury and mortality figures. Several inter-related factors contributed to women being at risk. First, the earthquake occurred when many women were inside cleaning up after the morning meal. Second, cheaply and shoddily constructed cement block houses and apartments collapsed, trapping or killing women inside while they were working. The practice of purdah (ie gender segregation and female seclusion from public space) was another factor that further contributed to the location of most women inside the private spaces of the home. In areas where purdah was not as strictly enforced, women were more likely to flee from their homes at the first indication of the earthquake. NGO field teams based in the area estimated that 17,000 women were expected to give birth within two months of the earthquake and 50% of the married women in Kashmir were pregnant at the time of the earthquake. These women faced an overall lack of obstetrical care and squalid conditions for delivery. Medical and relief teams noted a critical lack of female medical personnel to evaluate and attend to women’s health needs (Hamilton & Halverson, 2007).¹² Approximately 15% of pregnant women developed complications that required obstetrical care, and up to 5% will require some type of surgery, including cesarean section (Miller, 2007).¹³

Enarson argued about gender and disaster that “Gender relations as well as natural disasters are socially constructed under different geographic, cultural, political-economic and social conditions and have complex social consequences for women and men” (Enarson & Meyreles, 2003). She further argued that gender is also seen as an aspect of

women's lives more than men's and as derivative of social class, i.e. women are disaster victims because they are poor, vulnerable and insecure (Enarson & Meyreles, 2003). Ideological constraints on female mobility may limit access to lifesaving information, shelter, or relief goods. Male dominance in disaster decision-making undermines women's greater willingness to mitigate the effects of known hazards (e.g. moving livestock, tools, or household goods to safer locations, making evacuation plans), may misdirect disaster relief from family needs to personal interests, and often leads to gender-biased relief and reconstruction programs. Sexual and domestic violence magnifies the demands women face during crisis but is not integrated into post disaster housing policies or disaster public health initiatives. Extensive care-giving responsibilities throughout the disaster cycle substantially increase women's emotional and material workload and when care-givers put the well-being of others first, may endanger women's lives. Heterosexual practices and kinship relations place women outside the norm (e.g. widows, single women, lesbians and single mothers) at greater risk when relief programs are designed to reach women through male-headed households.

Women are also at greater risk due to power relations intersecting with gender (e.g. social inequalities based on race/ethnicity, social class, age) and to global patterns of development. Economic globalization increases women's economic insecurity (e.g. through contingent labour, job loss in restructuring industries, increased informal-sector work) and expands their unpaid work (e.g. through structural adjustment cutbacks in social services disproportionately used by women). Environmental degradation clearly endangers women as the primary users and managers of natural resources (e.g. drought effects on women farmers, deforestation effects on fuel wood gathering).

Social Vulnerability

Disaster and vulnerability can be understood with the help of theory of social vulnerability. It refers to how certain social, economic and political forces influence the extent to which various peoples and communities experience the impact of a disaster. A growing body of research from the social sciences, documents how various attributes and conditions such as poverty, race and ethnicity, gender, age, health and physical ability, and housing conditions place human populations at risk of adverse consequences from a disaster. These social vulnerability factors are often interrelated and operate through the primary mechanism of unequal access to social, economic, and political resources and the decision structures that govern them. In other words, disasters may be "natural" events but the impacts of disasters are "social and political events that are linked to who we are, how we live, and how we structure and maintain our society."

According to Enarson, "disaster risk is socially distributed in ways that reflect the social divisions that already exist in society" (Enarson, 2000). Those who experience these conditions are more likely to lack accurate decision-making information, to lose life and/or property and to suffer psychological, demographic, economic or political impacts

as direct or indirect effects. The poor, the very young and very old, minorities, the disabled, and specifically females have higher risk. When these characteristics intersect vulnerability multiplies.

In the recent Indian Ocean Tsunami, about 150,000 women were pregnant in the affected area. Of those 150,000 women it can be assumed that an estimated 40,000 surviving pregnant women who were forcibly displaced by the Tsunami disaster faced an especially heavy psycho-social and physical load. Such maternal stress is directly proportional with the number of babies born preterm or small for gestational age and with the number of spontaneous and induced abortions (Miller & Arquilla, 2007).¹⁴ (Pregnant and lactating women are especially vulnerable to lack of sanitation and poor water quality (Algassee, 2004).¹⁵ Pregnant women require high amounts of water to keep themselves and the developing fetus hydrated and for the increasing extra-cellular space and amniotic fluid. Lactating women require even more water than pregnant women (Howard & Bartram, 2003).

Hazards and disasters are gender blind, theoretically both male and females are vulnerable and affected but it is a fact that poor are much more vulnerable and hit hard, severity of disaster and hazards differ place to place and time to time so it hits males and females differently.

Feminist scholarship demonstrates that gender serves as a primary organizing principle of all societies and is therefore an essential lens through which to view the experience of a disaster such as a hurricane; disaster research suggests both vulnerability and capacity for women experiencing disaster. The foundation of this theory holds that women are oppressed on the basis of gender due to dominant patriarchal ideology. In contemporary feminism, the concept of patriarchy has received considerable attention and has been subjected to a number of different interpretations. Feminist theory is a system of concepts, propositions and analysis that seeks to understand women's situations and experiences in order to improve them.

Pakistan is a country prone to experiencing various types of disasters both natural and human because of Pakistan's physical and environmental condition and socio-economic situation. Women are more vulnerable in Pakistani society especially in disaster because of social and cultural environment and tradition and the way women are brought up. Poverty and inequality put women in a more vulnerable position and they suffer more in daily life and at times of disaster. For example the number of women who lost their lives in the Tsunami in Indonesia is triple, even quadruple that of men.

In Bangladesh, many women died during a flood in 2001 because their traditional long dress and purda hindered their movements and prevented them from escaping the rising water women also find it hard to climb walls, trees, and roofs because they are culturally forbidden to do these "manly" activities in their daily lives, D' Cunha said women are

more likely to die in natural or man-made disasters than men. If women do survive, they suffer humiliation and harassment in evacuation camps due to their gender. Survivors who are sent to evacuation camps are sexually harassed due to lack of privacy and separate toilets for women.

The Differential Needs of Women in Disasters

Women's needs also differ from those of men at times of disaster because biologically they are different from males and they are responsible for child care. They are in need of diapers, feeding bottles; baby food and other items of women specific need. Gynecologists and childbirth service are also needed during and after disaster. Women should have separate bathrooms with doors looking away from tents and the security problems of women and young girls should be taken into account.

Conclusion

Women are influenced differently than men by disasters. It can be explained by feminist theories and perspectives. Research studies show that patriarchy and male domination is the root cause. It is also observed that in countries/communities where females' status is low and they are in subordinate position vis-à-vis men females are much more vulnerable and affected more by disasters than males. Factors responsible for women's low status are less access to resources, gendered power relations, gendered division of labour, women's responsibility for domestic duties, less freedom for mobilization, few sources of income, very low or no control over resources, not involved in decision making and women's reproductive and sexual health which is controlled by others specially male members of the households. Thus, in preparing mitigation and strategies, their vulnerability should be taken into account. Women are at a greater risk of male violence in the aftermath of disasters. Women are at high risk of mortality and morbidity, during and after disaster. Due to hazard and disaster people often lose their houses, lives of their dear ones and also livelihoods. In these situations women's responsibilities increase. It shows that subsequent to any disaster, women have to play a pivotal and responsible role not only for their families but for the entire community affected. Therefore, there is need to view women's role in a natural disaster from different perspectives and prepare them to cope with disaster. It is also need of time that those areas which are at the high risk of disasters and hazards, the gendered power relations must be altered through strategies and policies of gender mainstreaming.

End Notes

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