Chapter 8
Conceptualizing Disasters from a Gender Perspective

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Abstract This chapter focuses on how disasters are conceptualized from a gender perspective and will explore concepts such as violence and death against the backdrop of gender inequalities. It will critically examine the conceptualization of a disaster in terms of humanitarian response and execution of policies that aim to protect individuals in disaster situations and mediate the risks that emerge during certain contexts, such as refugee or internally displaced camps. Finally, it will be concluded that disasters, as conceptualised from a gender perspective, still need a more all-encompassing theoretical framework to account for the lived experiences of individuals in terms of their gender identity in societies during times of disasters.

Keywords Disasters · Gender · Gender-based violence · Humanitarian crisis and response · Culture · Vulnerability

8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on how disasters are conceptualized from a gender perspective and will explore concepts such as violence and death against the backdrop of gender inequalities. It will critically examine the conceptualization of a disaster in terms of humanitarian response and execution of policies that aim to protect individuals in disaster situations and mediate the risks that emerge during certain contexts, such as refugee or internally displaced camps. Finally, it will be concluded that disasters, as conceptualised from a gender perspective, still need a more all-encompassing theoretical framework to account for the lived experiences of individuals in terms of their gender identity in societies during times of disasters.
8.2 The Global Disaster of Gender?

“ISIS are afraid of girls” (Deardon 2015) is a title of a recent newspaper article depicting interviews with Kurdish female fighters in Northern Syria. The statement is placed against the backdrop of an extreme religious ideology that claims a Muslim man who is killed by a woman will not enter heaven. Since the conflict is characterised as a Holy War by ISIS fighters, and motivated by a vision of the afterlife, the prospect of being killed by a woman is significant. This significance can be viewed from different temporal perspectives; the first is in terms of the factors that contributed to the formation of both the belief and the way that the conflict has subsequently developed. The continuum between society and conflict illustrates a central tenet of the way disasters, which often include conflict, are structured and conceptualized from a gender studies perspective. In this sense, societal processes during peace times are reflected during times of conflict, with the norms and practices associated with peace times becoming magnified. Furthermore, the comment made by the female Kurdish fighters is laden with normative values that are drawn from lived experiences and symptomatic of gender equality conflicts within the region. Thus, one conflict is never an isolated conflict but surrounded by meta-conflicts originating from meta-narratives. This chapter is an attempt to explore the conceptualization of disasters from a gender studies perspective. To develop this analysis, time must first be committed to understanding why a gender studies concept has developed in the way it has and what it means in the context of disaster research.

8.3 Gender Studies: How Are Disasters Conceptualized?

The contributions in this chapter from gender theorists involve individuals whose work may not have initially or primarily been geared towards responding to disasters. The field of gender studies refers to a dynamic and multi-disciplinary group of researchers. A gender studies perspective views disasters as gendered-constructed processes. This understanding has carried with it a very important normative message: that to respond to those in need during a disaster, gender needs to be considered as an integral factor. Thus, the conceptualization of disasters in gender studies has been tasked with providing argumentation on the gendered aspects of a disaster.

This chapter will also explore a further element in how disasters are conceptualized in gender studies by asking why gender researchers have been involved significantly and increasingly in disaster risk, reduction, and response. A deconstruction of the origin of the interaction between gender and disaster traces the question of how are disasters conceptualized within gender studies to the ethical issue of addressing and responding to gender during disasters. Contributions from feminist perspectives, for example, have pushed for disasters to be understood in terms of the weaknesses and determinants within a society that determines the nature of the
In other words, the disaster is occurring prior to the event(s) that trigger a humanitarian emergency crisis. The consequences of a gender-neutral framework of disasters and a binary approach towards disaster and non-disaster or vulnerable and non-vulnerable settings and populations are negative. Enarson and Pease (2016, xviii) have critically reflected on the normative aspect of disasters bracketing out the ‘unheard voices’ of a disaster. They write how “singular problems arise from genders being taken as ‘natural’, fixed or physically based, when so much is done to craft them in service of vested interests and institutional values and goals”, and then how “emergencies can potentially be opportunities for lasting change and improvement. But also, as in so many global change issues, this may not suit vested interests. They get busy, sometimes violently, trying to restore, even exaggerate, pre-disaster gender relations” (Enarson and Pease 1998, xviii). Conceptualising disasters from a gender perspective requires understanding that governments, local policy-makers, or certain groups within a society for example will be potentially in contrast with aspects of a generalised humanitarian intervention premised on equality of human life, without factoring in differences in decision-making related to gender identity. During the Taliban regime, for example, women were forbidden to be examined by male doctors (Iacopino 1998, 58). A gender-neutral disaster framework will therefore lead to the overlooking of the gendered nature of the body during conflict, and its impact on the provision of healthcare to women. In turn, a failure to address gender will reduce the efficacy of a disaster response in addressing the needs of the entire affected population.

Disasters, then, occupy a space in which policy-based responses and interventions are potentially at risk of being centred on reinforcing a return to the “things that are actually hidden” (Enarson and Pease 2016, xviii). On the other hand, disasters can be an “opening for other genders” but by virtue of this opening being created, the dominant pre-existing gendered terrain such as masculinity as in Enarson and Peases’ example becomes threatened. In this view, a conceptualization of disasters from a gender studies perspective refers to a shift in social landscapes, as well as physical ones. This is the meaning of the embodiment of a terrain as gendered; our landscapes are the site of our lived experiences, memory, and future discourses some of which will involve conflicts or movements towards social justice or restructuring of cultural, religious, or gender norms and values. Disasters become case studies that lead to critical developments for social change.

8.4 Basis for Disasters

Disasters-especially disasters that were considered as ‘natural’—have traditionally been subjected to narratives that refer to actions of deities or spirits or curses, which in turn are in response to some aspect of human action within the affected population. Typically, such rhetoric reflects pre-existing understandings of localised views of the surrounding world. In a study exploring images of God in participant narratives following Hurricane Katrina, a collection of both positive and negative
associations was reported. Images of God were categorised as “(a) Omnipresent God, (b) Omnipotent God, (c) Distant God, (d) Personal God, (e) God in Others, (f) God as Judge, (g) God of Lessons, and (h) God as Loving Father Figure” (Aten et al. 2008, 249). The meaning of these images to the participants revealed paradoxical and contradictory understandings and experiences of the ways individuals related themselves to God and the associations that connected their lived experiences with the event of the disaster. From a gender perspective, the lack of coherence in the way that images of God were envisioned by the participants show the difficulty in making generalized and absolutist claims about the impact of the event. Furthermore, the notion of a disaster as being detached from values or actions within a community is challenged by how the internalization of narratives relates to lived experiences of underpinning narratives. For example, individuals may receive distress related to their status as a man or woman, or other identity if situated in a society that is structured on highly prescribed and strict gender roles. Disastrous events potentially confirm negative beliefs towards a particular gender; following the earthquake in Afghanistan in October 2015, societal interpretations, used on an anecdotal basis for this chapter, of the earthquake that resulted in over 1500 deaths attributed blame to women for wearing un-modest dress. In turn, this served to reinforce ideologies that prescribed wearing religious garments to protect the honor related to the woman, her family, and the wider society. By taking a gendered perspective to a disaster, the response should address both needs directly related to the disaster itself and needs related to long-term issues, especially related to the recognition of human rights standards. This is the basis for much of the work (Fordham 2003; Enarson and Fordham 2001) that has been developed by gender researchers arguing that a short-term acute and emergency approach to disasters does not address or recognize that the real disaster for women is in the long-term effects.

8.5 Contextualizing Disasters: Who’s Ground Is It?

Gender analysis and frameworks have worked to improve theoretical approaches to disasters that have traditionally treated disasters as stand-alone events with clearly defined phases in terms of crisis and recovery. In turn, an ethical issue has been highlighted in the way that relief agencies were initially reluctant to examine disaster management and response polices (Comfort et al. 1999). By pushing a gender-based conceptualization of a disaster into policy agenda through analysing the circumstances that create or contribute to conditions that result in human communities, disasters have gradually been reframed.

Disasters are a social phenomenon and social processes become more visible in times of crisis. This means that societal, cultural, and religious norms and values are evident in the nature of a disaster and shape the needs and risks of affected individuals. Gender is an organising principle in society, which is explored throughout this chapter, and thus disasters are not gender neutral.
Disasters are international frontlines where a society is shown to the rest of the world in its most fragile and bare state. Societal structures, depending on the extent of the disaster, are laid out in its skeletal form. In this sense, disasters viewed from a gender perspective are vital and fertile ground for both deconstruction and reconstruction. Furthermore, the way that gendered bodies impact on disasters reflects the social construction perspective of a disaster. For example, a woman’s capacity and resources and approaches towards a disaster symbolise a specific context and time (Enarson and Chakrabarti 2009). Yet, in parallel, such social processes are evident of the need to develop a systematic approach towards understanding disasters as more than an event. Disasters become expressions, and reflections, on current situations that a community, society and nation are facing. In this sense, this chapter will highlight the relationship of disasters to social transformation, which is especially important from a gender studies perspective to reconstruct societies to have greater gender equality. Social transformation is perhaps an integral reason why gender studies have contributed so much to disaster research because of the potential to respond to disasters in a way that helps reforms that are addressing gender injustices to develop and be sustained in viable conditions. Much of this chapter will focus on the ways that perspectives from gender studies on disasters have been segregated from disaster studies and the ways that integration attempts are currently being taken forward and why.

8.6 Disasters: Processes Not Events

The changing and evolving landscape of how disasters are conceptualized by researchers has gradually come to align more closely with the view of disasters from a gender studies perspective. As understandings about disasters have increased, there has been greater acceptance of a disaster being informed by and underpinned by social problems theory, particularly during the late 1980s and the 1990s, which the United Nations called the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (Kreps and Drabek 1996).

Earlier phases of gender studies criticised disaster research for overlooking the effects of gender and gender relations and furthermore, bypassing the role of women’s involvement in disaster-affected households and communities (Peacock et al. 1997). An initial way of conceptualizing disasters through a gender studies perspective, then, was to create systematic argumentation for how to situate gender in disaster research discourses. By the 2000s both gender studies and disaster research began to call for more substantial recognition of gender-sensitive disaster relief.

In part, the development of conceptualizing disasters through a gender lens has come from qualitative research that has primarily been with women. The goal of this research has been to bring women’s subjectivities to the forefront of considering how to respond to disasters. In a paper exploring the experiences of women in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (Cupples 2007), the argument attempts to persuade disaster management actors to incorporate a more nuanced focus on the
complexities of gender identity and relations between genders. This argument is evidence of the polarization of women either in terms of their vulnerabilities or in terms of their capabilities in both gender and disaster literature.

Furthermore, criticisms from gender studies perspectives of attempts to integrate gender into disaster management have been in the form of, for example, “if addressed at all, gender has been integrated into disaster research and practice as a demographic variable or personality trait and not as the basis for a complex and dynamic set of social relations” (Enarson 2002, 5). In this sense, the argument, then, is to create a conceptual framework where gender relations and disasters “are socially constructed under different geographic, cultural, political-economic and social conditions and have complex social consequences for women and men” (Ibid.). A long-standing criticism is in the way that women’s lives have been reduced to that of disaster victims.

8.7 Understanding Gender in Disaster Response: The Normativity of Humanitarian Interventions

A recent study from Iran concluded that different aspects of a disaster were manifested through different aspects of gender. In the context of recent earthquakes in Iran, it was described that a woman is present in society in different ways; namely, as an individual who experiences the disaster, as a member of a family, and as part of a community (Nakhaei et al. 2015). Using these themes, Nakhaei et al. (Ibid) could identify key needs of Iranian women affected by the earthquakes. By understanding the status of gender within the Iranian context, an appropriate disaster response could be tailored. A major concern of affected women was to be resettled into a permanent home, which reflected the status of the woman in the family structure as needing to mediate the changes that occurred in their family including separation and loss of male family members. This poses practical challenges for a woman’s everyday life in a society where liberty is restricted based on gender as well as the emotional impact of the bereavement and reorganization of family life. Finding ways to recover from a disaster may be at odds with the ideas of progression and modernity that humanitarian workers have as their ideals and markers of a functioning society. This gap in perception and goals for planning needs to be addressed. Often it can lead to an uncomfortable prescription of imposing normative values or realigning gender roles and requirements onto a foundation that is not sustainable.

Positive social transformation related to gender is possible in the context of disaster settings. The Nepalese civil war conflict offers a long-standing example. Traditionally Nepalese widows were required to wear a white sari. However, following an armed conflict lasting from 1996 to 2006 and causing over 15,000 deaths, many women became widows. During the post-conflict era, widows challenged the centuries-old entrenched belief system surrounding the status of women and resisted the practice of the ‘white sari’ (Yadav 2016). Here the complexity of a disaster is
witnessed. The conflict became the context for social transformation from a form of
gender discrimination to gender equality.

### 8.8 Developing Vulnerability

Previous work on vulnerability in disaster research (Cannon 1994; Perloff 1983)
towards women during disasters that has reduced women to passive victims has
gradually been challenged through contributions in gender studies. An alternative
strategy has emerged, namely the consideration of a disaster as an opportunity for
social justice. From a gender lens, therefore, vulnerability is temporal and linked to
social justice and development. In this sense, development programmes in both
disaster and non-disaster settings focus on providing skills for resilience and
increased capability to manage complex and challenging situations. In a similar
vein, disaster research scholars called for integration between gender, disaster and
development (Pelling 2003), which represents an intersectionality in addressing
vulnerability as a form of disaster response. Challenges remain, however, for those
working from a gender perspective framework. Providing immediate relief and
physical alleviation of suffering, including saving lives, conflicts with development
programmes that were ongoing prior to disasters. These projects are then disrupted
or terminated due to lack of collaboration and differing priorities plus different
time-frames for their interventions. On this pragmatic level, the conceptualization
of disasters from gender studies suffers from different viewpoints from other disci-
plines whereby gender may be overlooked or not considered at all. These are view-
points that situate gender into a sub-category or additional feature of a specific event
such as a disaster. Gender studies on the other hand views the disaster entirely from
a framework of the gender norms of a society. In this sense a disaster is framed in
terms of gender relationships, or rather, the imbalance of gender inequalities. The
disaster that is shaped by an earthquake or a famine, for example, is the way in
which gender roles have been structured and organized in a way that creates risk and
vulnerability. Risk and vulnerability are the two components that shape an individ-
ual’s health needs during disastrous events. The disaster is the inequality in society,
and not specifically the catastrophe of a natural and/or man-made event.

Vulnerability has become central to gender discourses in analysing disasters.
Vulnerability, though, was first argued to be key to conceptions of gender in discus-
sions about violence (Hollander 2001). During risk analysis of violence, it was
found that men in the United States of America have a higher risk of experiencing
violence but the fear of experiencing violence is greater for women. In response to
this disparity, Hollander (2001) argued that femininity has become associated with
vulnerability whereas masculinity is paired with dangerousness. Vulnerability, then,
is personified as a core component of being female (ibid). In turn, however, violence
against women and girls has become polarised in a binary victim and perpetrator
relationship. Thus, in dominant feminist narratives about vulnerability, it is in this
context that the male perpetration of violence is assigned. However, the tension and
complexity of conceptualizing vulnerability in disasters serves a twofold purpose; namely to assess risk in terms of vulnerability but also to develop empowerment and deconstruct victimization in development following disasters. Fundamentally, the discourse of vulnerability illustrates a rhetoric of the body that is gendered, and it is this gendered body that determines whether an event is a disaster based on the needs that result.

8.9 Deconstructing Disasters from a Vulnerability Perspective: Inserting Intersectionality

Within a gendered framework, vulnerability is a temporal phenomenon. Vulnerability is addressed to identify strategies to counteract the social factors that are structuring the ways that vulnerable groups are susceptible to risk and harm. Following on, vulnerability highlights that there are two elements to consider from a gender studies perspective about disasters; namely that the disaster is gendered and the experience of the individual during the disaster is gendered.

A very contemporary aspect of disasters through a gender framework is the systematic recognition of multiple identities. The base-line of gender is a determinant of needs, risks or vulnerabilities during and beyond a disaster and/or humanitarian crisis. Invariably, a gender perspective has viewed disasters as an “intersecting dimension of human life” (Enarson et al. 2007, 130). In this sense, the concept of disaster continues to develop in terms of its larger narratives that embody lived experiences and a continuous spectrum of social processes. The notion of intersectionality offers a more nuanced cutting-edge platform to launch dialogues via research and collaboration via multiple sectors of disaster planning, response and evaluations. But the difficulty is that when the categories of a gender-based social science theory of disasters are implemented, they become weighted down by their own internal structures. Health, for example, is undergoing a transformation taking it from its medicalised home within the clinic into a greater societal situatedness where there is resistance against reducing health as an isolated and measurable quality of an individual. The inter-connectedness of health is important because it links to the Intersectionalities of disasters: namely that there is motivation for health too to be conceptualised from a gender perspective.

8.10 Mental Health in Disasters; Challenges in Assessing Needs from a Gender Perspective

A gendered conceptualization of disasters has called for greater attention to the experiences of those whose lives and livelihoods are affected during a disaster, and for the overlapping of women’s experiences to be counteracted. Feminist theory
from disaster mental health research identified geographical differences in the way that women’s experiences were accounted for and have tried to respond to this discrepancy. U.S.-focused research has examined and utilised the conservative agenda of a disaster, covering topics related to disaster policy, management organizations and warning systems (Bolin et al. 1998). Research, however, on disasters and the impact of the lived experience during a disaster, more readily included theoretical advances from feminist and gender studies including the effects of disasters on women and disadvantaged groups (Bolin et al. 1998). An explanation for this differentiation could be that researching disasters in other contexts highlighted cultural variations and promoted the need to learn from communities, which in turn created the space for a more diverse range of voices and dialogue.

Understanding mental health to a significant extent is dependent on narrative and attention to the disaster recovery period. However, despite disaster mental health gaining greater ground in recent years and featuring the agenda of disaster responders, barriers exist when trying to gain a fuller picture of a survivor’s mental health. From a disaster research perspective, mental health is understood to be significant for the recovery process. However, in line with a gender studies concept of a disaster, mental health should be stream-lined in terms of challenges present in the society pre (and post) disaster. Presently, there is a dominant view of disaster mental health that has been limited to negative consequences from a traumatic stress perspective (Joseph and Jaswal 2014). In part, the privileging of a trajectory focused on trauma in terms of disaster mental health conforms to an aspect of disaster conceptualization that has been consistently challenged by those working in some capacity within gender studies and other disciplines. Fordham (1999, 15) writes that those who have been affected by a disaster are classified as “belonging to a homogenous group called victims”. Following on from such a perspective, the limitations of understanding disaster mental health as victims suffering from trauma means that this “apparent similarity conceals considerable difference: difference in terms of gender, class, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, culture, etc.” (ibid). A gender studies perspective is therefore not only concerned with gender but with raising awareness and calling for systematic analysis and addressing of other differences within groups of people who become classed as belonging to a specific category such as “victims”.

The gender studies concept of disasters as being fundamentally concerned with social justice is essential for the development of disaster mental health understanding. Given the treatment gap for global mental health, feminist approaches towards health research have been suggested (Chiumento et al. 2016) due to an emphasis on a form of social justice that emphasises “multiple and complex structures of inequality and power” (Rogers and Kelly 2011, 397). Considering this, Fordham continues to argue that “recognizing difference in disaster is part of the solution, not the problem” (Fordham 1999, 15). In the context of mental health, individuals suffering from mental disorders are subjected to varying degrees of stigmatization and discrimination and the recognition of other voices is instrumental to reduce margin-
alization. Gender studies is an area within disaster research that seeks to create a more nuanced approach to disaster management such as in disaster mental health and its instrumentalisation as part of the post-disaster recovery process.

On a more applied level, a gender conceptualization of disasters in relation to mental health is linked to the designing and implementation of mental health recovery programmes. In a retrospective study conducted 6–11 months following the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, a total of 42.6% of the respondents, who were all residents and survivors of the disaster, were identified as having moderate or serious mental health problems (Yokyama et al. 2014). Furthermore, the same study showed that women were significantly affected by mental health problems following the disaster. Health complaints, severe economic status, relocations and lack of social networks were found to be important risk factors for mental health. Interventions that respond to these risk factors are important for the reduction of mental health problems after the disaster—for example, interventions for men that focused on economic support. These findings gain more traction when combined with the theoretical aspects of a gender framework to conceptualize disasters. Hence there arises pressure for the roles of researcher and activist when conceptualizing disasters from a gender perspective.

8.11 Expanding Horizons: The Forming of Violence from Disasters

The significance of disasters as a precursor for an increase in violence including domestic violence, sexual violence, and child abuse, neglect, and exploitation (WHO 2005) has prompted a discourse within gender theory to respond proactively to disaster-related violence across all sectors and phases of disasters and disaster management. However, more epidemiological studies are needed to investigate the association between natural disasters and violence (Rezaeian 2013).

Increased risk of gender-based violence during disasters is linked to gender inequality. A disaster is not isolated from the social and cultural factors that underpin gender inequality and structure gender-based violence. In the context of the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004, a preliminary study exploring the needs of women helped to inform a community based programme to reduce the incidence of sexual and gender based violence in post-tsunami Sri Lanka (Rees et al. 2005). The programme enabled the strengthening of communities and social support networks for women including resources to formally document incidences of violence. A further aspect of the programme targeted the need for women to be centralised in social and political movements in preventing violence and improving gender equality in the long term. A gender studies perspective holds that women need to be represented more in prevention of violence interventions and this includes disaster response programmes.
Having made significant transformations in the moral viewing of disasters from a gender studies perspective, conventional views that a disaster is a natural phenomenon and a devastating event, which result in a generalised vulnerability of the affected society, are weakened. Gender studies continues to highlight areas of disasters that are subject to complex social processes and indirect ways that disasters impact on individuals depending on different aspects of their identity such as gender.

A study was undertaken following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (DHOS) that explored the relationship between oil spill exposure and mental health among women in the southern coastal Louisiana parishes affected by the DHOS (Rung et al. 2016). As part of a telephone interview with 2842 women between 2012 and 2014 following the DHOS, women were asked about depression, mental distress, domestic conflict and exposure to the oil spill. Sixteen percent reported an increase in the number of fights with their partners, and 11% reported an increase in the intensity of partner fights. In addition, 13% reported severe mental distress and 28% reported symptoms of depression; these results of poor mental health outcomes following the DHOS referred to different psychological consequences of the disasters, and to the breakdown of livelihoods and families, and the deterioration of mental health. In terms of disaster mitigation, it was understood that exposure to the DHOS was a significant predictor of both domestic violence and associated mental health distress. Given that the southern coastal Louisiana region is disaster-prone this information is important for future disaster responses and the detection of aspects of the disaster that require specific attention in both the short and the long term. This combination of different lived experiences conforms to a gender studies view of disasters that women experience the effects of a disaster some time after the immediate and identified point of the disaster, and that social processes such as violence towards women increase in times of crisis.

8.12 Conclusion

The conceptualization of disasters from a gender theoretical analysis continues to influence the framework of disaster risk, reduction, and response and the network of disaster and gender studies is expanding. This is not to say that a gendered understanding of disasters is not without its challenges; but the advocacy and focus towards sustainable and long-term approaches towards providing social justice in the form of gender equality is persistent and overcoming shortfalls in disaster mediation that have previously been encountered. Thus, the view that women be represented in disaster interventions is central to the discourse of disasters in gender studies and widening the critical analysis to impact on other genders such as masculinities in the assessment of risk and vulnerability when the status of a discriminated group is elevated. On a final note, this chapter has emphasised that societies
experience disasters on different structural levels and different points of a disaster impact on specific groups of people at different times per the nature of the cultural and social factors that are pre-existing in the disaster context. Disaster responses must be community-based and nuanced to account for gender as the organizing principle of a disaster as a continuous process.

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