

---

CHAPTER 7

---

# Gender Concerns of Recovery and Reconstruction

---

Neelu Thapa  
Dikshya Singh

---

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 living in well-made houses are less than among the poorer ones 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.<sup>1</sup>

Disasters directly or indirectly disrupt the daily lives of people, giving rise to new conflicts, new burdens and new opportunities. The better the access to resources—finance, social network, influence, information, assets and so on—the more resilience people develop to natural calamities. Thus, any disaster may hit the young and old, rich and poor, men and women alike, but the impact is felt differently by different sections. The inequities faced in everyday life, based on their gender, race, ethnicity and class, pervade the disaster experience—not only during the immediate aftermath but also over a prolonged period right through the reconstruction phase. Women, children and senior citizens stand among the most vulnerable groups to be affected. The impact varies also because of the different roles that men and women perform. Their response may also differ because of their different nature and outlook towards life fostered by the society and culture.

## **Vulnerable, disadvantaged**

Because of gender role differences, women are found to face a bigger brunt of disasters than men. This happens not because women and girls are essentially weaker than men and boys. The existing gender norms tend to put women at a disadvantage in terms of the capability to withstand disasters and their impacts. Not only do more women lose lives during disasters, it is seen that they also have a challenging time overcoming the impacts. It is not that men are not vulnerable or that all women are equally affected, but cross-cultural research has shown that women are generally more vul-

Table 7.1

### Gender development indicators in Nepal

Gender Development Index (GDI)	0.925
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	0.480
Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19)	60.5
Maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births)	258

Source: Human Development Report 2017

nerable to disasters than men.<sup>2</sup> The existing gender-based inequality manifests into more women losing their lives, being deprived of aid, being denied of life opportunities, lacking access to health and sanitation related services, facing psychological trauma and undergoing physical and sexual violence.<sup>3</sup> Further, existing cultural and social norms create conditions exposing women and girls to "substandard housing, social marginalization, impoverishment or economic insecurity, overwork from fulfilling care giving responsibilities and a lack of social power and political voice".<sup>4</sup> Disasters like earthquakes destroy houses forcing people to seek shelter in transitional camps, where women have to face numerous hardships in comparison to men—lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities, increased threat of sexual and physical violence and a host of psychosocial issues.

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 their suffering is less visible. This charts out the importance of giving specific attention to women and children during such times. Fortunately, state and humanitarian agencies involved in relief and recovery activities have tried to address such issues related to gender. Assessing the reconstruction efforts through the gender lens is more necessary in Nepal because of the large scale of emigration of male population for work. This has increased the

---

Box 7.1

---

## Women in Nepal

Despite some discriminatory laws, in general, women in Nepal are accorded equal rights. The Constitution promulgated in 2015 vows to eliminate any gender-based discrimination. Nevertheless, in practice, women in Nepal have limited access to societal, political, economic and administrative spheres. Age old discrimination in the society translates as inequality among men and women. The patriarchal hierarchy means that women lack bargaining power within families, and are relegated to a corner during decision making.

Political steps have been taken to address such discrimination by ensuring proportional representation and reservation for women in the local, provincial and federal governments. However, discrimination regarding access to quality education, nutrition, property and a disproportionate burden of domestic work leave women dependent on the male family members. In recent years, demographic change brought about by the increased migration of able-bodied family members—mostly men—has also changed gender relations. The increased number of female headed households could have increased the agency of women in decision making to an extent, but it has also increased the workload for the unprepared women.

Agriculture is the largest job provider to women in Nepal with more women employed in the sector than men. More than 67 per cent of women are employed in agriculture while only 6.7 per cent women work in non-agriculture wage earning jobs, according to Population Census. The seemingly low unemployment disguises the fact that women in Nepal work longer hours, earning little, as most of the employment is in the family owned farms that does not contribute in making them financially independent. Further, only 19.17 per cent of the households reported having land or house in the name of female members.

---

number of female headed households, which must have further gone up due to deaths of the male members of the family.

The reconstruction activities are not only important in the context of efforts towards building a safe, resilient and prosper-

Table 7.2

### Gender disaggregated information

	Female	Male
Estimated gross national income per capita (2011 PPP\$)	2,219	2,738
Human Development Index (HDI)	0.552	0.598
Labour force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	79.7	86.8
Life expectancy at birth (years)	72.2	69.0
Mean years of schooling (years)	3.6	6.4
Population with at least some secondary education (% ages 25 and older)	24.1	41.2
Ownership of land or house (%)	19.17	

Source: HDR 2017 and Census 2011

ous Nepal but also because every disaster provides opportunities which could be used for the benefit of women. This paper will look into how the women coped with the earthquake, how the government's post-disaster activities have impacted them and their status during the ongoing reconstruction phase.

### Impact differential

Socially imposed roles and prohibitions on women are responsible for the differentiated impact they must bear. Women often undertake three roles—reproduction, production and community management.<sup>5</sup> Reproduction refers to their domestic role including child bearing, nurturing the family, undertaking household chores and foraging for fuel, among others. These activities are essential for survival and maintenance of human life, thus not necessarily limited to child bearing. Production refers to income-generating activities—be it in agriculture or other sectors. The community

management role is related to voluntary works that women undertake to manage community resources for collective consumption, such as forest and water resource management, and, many times, it is the extension of their reproductive role.<sup>6</sup>

Without doubt men also juggle with multiple roles in their lives, but their activities are mostly concentrated on production activities and considered economically significant. It is notable that the reproductive and community management roles are voluntary, unpaid and considered to be primary activities of women- thus, invisible.<sup>7</sup> Given these roles, women are forced to face various kinds of vulnerabilities that men do not.

In addition, women have less access to or control over resources, such as social networks, information, financial security, education and the like. These are necessary to bounce back from disasters. This means increased social vulnerability and deprivation of the capacity to cope with hazardous events.

## **Fatalities**

The 2015 Gorkha Earthquake was one of the biggest disasters in Nepal's history. The disaster killed more females than males —56 per cent of the casualties were women.<sup>9</sup> As already mentioned, the traditional household role of women and their dress-code restrict them from self-rescue during disasters.<sup>10</sup> Their reproductive role as nurturers and care-givers tends to keep women and girls indoors making them more vulnerable during earthquakes. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Report (PDNA) published by the government of Nepal has also 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. Many such instances were reported during the Gorkha quake where they were seen running back indoors to rescue others.

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 disas-

ters kill more women at a younger age than men.<sup>11</sup> According to the seminal paper by Neumayer and Plumper that analyses data from 141 countries, natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women than men as "the socially constructed gender-specific vulnerability of females built into everyday socio-economic patterns that lead to relatively higher female disaster mortality rates compared to men".<sup>12</sup>

### **Loss of livelihood and means**

Financially recovering from the impact of a disaster is also difficult for women. Usually, women are employed in agriculture or the informal sector and hardly ever possess any significant financial or farming assets. 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 Institute found a higher number of women headed post-disaster households living with minimal income due to their agriculture income and livestock losses.<sup>13</sup> 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.

The earthquake impact is not a one-year phenomenon. Nepal saw a greater loss of its agriculture productivity down the line, not just the year that the disaster struck, owing to damage to stock of seeds stored for plantation in subsequent seasons. Likewise, families struggling to manage their finances in the wake of a disaster tend to dispose smaller livestock such as goats, pigs and chickens, which are generally controlled by women. 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. This would naturally affect their ability to re-engage in economic activities. In the absence of suf-

ficient access to finance, these micro enterprises are hardly able to recover from such exogenous shocks.

Further, disaster inflicted destruction of key infrastructure, such as water resources, electricity transmission lines, roads and others, limiting their ability to engage in income earning activities. Disruption in drinking water supply was found to have increased the work burden of women and girls in the family. Women tend to spend 16.3 hours every week more, on such non-economic activities, than men as 75 per cent of the domestic work load falls on women's shoulders.<sup>14</sup> According to PDNA, women were spending as much as three hours collecting water in some rural areas. This constrained them from seeking financially rewarding works.<sup>15</sup>

Disaster not only destroys existing income source of the women, it increases women's dependency on male family members. In cases where women do not have a mechanism in place to support them, they are forced into insecure employment. Desperate situation may even force them to engage in transactional sex work.

Gender stereotyping of responsibilities could also be disadvantageous for men. Since men are cast as providers of the family, deaths or the destruction of livelihood, caused by earthquake, did force many young men to abandon their education and seek jobs to support their family as 'man of the house'.

## **Sexual and physical violence**

According to a 2015 study by International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society (IFRC), domestic and sexual violence increases following disasters.<sup>16</sup> In places, where violence against women and girls (VAWG) is already high, it is difficult to ascertain whether a disaster increased the violence or brought the violence that happens in private into public scrutiny.<sup>17</sup> Nepal's VAWG record shows that disasters put the safety of women and girls in a more precarious situation. According to the National Demographic Health Survey 2011, as many as one in every five women experiences physical violence in Nepal and one in ten experiences sexual violence.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, another study published by the government

shows that 48 per cent of Nepali women report having experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, women from Dalit or minority groups; widowed, divorced or separated women; and women living in hilly regions, were significantly more likely to report experiencing violence during their lifetime. According to Nepal Police Women and Child Services Directorate, the number of reported cases of crime against women has annually increased on an average of 14 per cent in the last decade.<sup>21</sup> But, the number of formally reported cases is only a small fraction of the incidents that happen. For women who reported experiencing violence, almost three quarters of the perpetrators were intimate partners.<sup>22</sup>

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 sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>23</sup>

Although, there is a dearth of data on VAWG incidences in the aftermath of the earthquake, anecdotal reports support that violence did increase. Trauma caused by the disaster is not the source of the violence but could lead to an escalation of violent incidences.<sup>24</sup> Gender violence is mostly about control—the abuser uses violence or threat of violence to exert power over victims. Destitution and shortages caused by disasters may make men unable to fulfil their gendered roles in patriarchal societies, where men are supposed to be providers and protectors. Abusive men resort to violence on their partners to feel that they are still powerful, or to try and gain back control in personal relationships. Some men tend to use disasters, and the resultant stress, as justification to inflict violence.<sup>25</sup> Another theory regarding increased instances of domestic violence is that living collectively in temporary shelters exposes what used to be private interactions (violence) to the public view.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> Women Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC Nepal), a non-government organization that keeps database of incidences of VAWG, has said that as many as 400 cases of violence against women were reported in the temporary shelters.<sup>28</sup> However, a majority of these cases were not registered with the police as, usually, these were happening to the reporter's 'friend of a friend' or 'heard in the neighbourhood'. According to National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) data, half of the districts affected by the earthquake registered a spike in numbers of domestic violence cases.<sup>29</sup>

Families with young women living in temporary camps live in fear of sexual abuse, especially when there are reports of rapes in the shelters.<sup>30</sup> 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 rapes, usually involving minors as victims, inside Kathmandu Valley shelters in the first few months of the disaster.<sup>31</sup> 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 in 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.

According to NHRC, human trafficking increased significantly in the year following the earthquake. According to its report Trafficking In Persons (TIP) 2015/016, in Fiscal Year 2015/16, more than 23,000 cases of trafficking or attempts to traffic were reported.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that formally reported cases are lower than those that go unnoticed. However, trafficking is not limited to trafficking for sex work, women are being voluntarily trafficked to

Gulf countries to work as housemaids, where they are exposed to different types of abuse.

### **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. Among women displaced by the earthquake, about 525,000 were of reproductive age, 126,000 of them were pregnant among who 21,000 required obstetric care in the three months.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, in the affected areas, of the 360 existing basic emergency obstetric and neonatal care sites or birthing centres, 112 were severely damaged and 144 partially.<sup>35</sup> Six district hospitals and 331 rural health facilities, including staff quarters, were also severely damaged in these districts. The damages not only disrupted the services but also suspended other services like anti-retroviral therapy, family planning and management of sexually transmitted infections. Moreover, disruptions in reproductive healthcare can result in increases in unsafe abortions, maternal mortality and unwanted pregnancies. Nearly one in five married women of reproductive age, surveyed by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Central Department of Population, Tribhuvan University, reported that couples were planning to postpone their next birth by at least one year due to the earthquake.<sup>36</sup>

Taboos and harmful cultural practices related to menstruation have turned them into social ills as they have been used by many in Nepal to discriminate against women. Given the communal living in temporary shelters, many women and girls found maintaining menstrual hygiene a challenge. In such scenarios, dignity kits distributed by humanitarian agencies were useful. The kits contained material used to maintain personal hygiene and safety, such as clothes, sanitary pads, innerwear, towel, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, nail clippers and flashlights.<sup>37</sup> Lack of privacy in the camps and community latrines and bathroom also made women uncomfortable.

The impact on sexual and reproductive health due to damages to healthcare centres was temporary as the government was able to rebuild the service centres to a substantial extent within six months of the earthquake. However, the larger impact on sexual and reproductive healthcare was felt by adolescent girls. Many girls were married off early by their family members to lighten the financial burden while coping with the disaster.<sup>38</sup> Although, study is required to ascertain the impact of such marriages on sexual and reproductive health of these adolescent girls, it is well-established that early marriage and pregnancy have repercussions in their health.

### 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 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 benefits that government provided due to lack of essential paperwork like land ownership certificate, citizenship certificate etc. They were unable to open the bank accounts, which was mandatory for cash transfers, as they did not have citizenship certificates.

### Psychosocial impact

Deaths and damages are visible and quantifiable, but the trauma caused by the disaster and its aftermath have a lasting psychological impact. Trauma and stress caused by disasters are noted to cause depression, sleeplessness and symptoms of Post-Traumatic

Table 7.3

**Crimes against women**

Fiscal Year	Rape	Attempt to rape	Human Trafficking	Domestic Violence	Others*
2000/01	141	18	110	432	178
2001/02	186	33	120	711	190
2002/03	122	35	92	449	131
2003/04	129	21	40	410	65
2004/05	157	18	55	569	86
2005/06	154	19	56	922	55
2006/07	188	25	72	730	78
2007/08	195	38	97	939	80
2008/09	317	70	112	1100	104
2009/10	309	73	123	881	139
2010/11	391	75	139	968	184
2011/12	376	101	161	983	165
2012/13	555	156	118	2250	309
2013/14	677	245	144	1800	425
2014/15	912	414	185	6835	493
2015/16	981	562	181	8268	601
2016/17	1089	452	212	9398	533
2017/18	1131	536	227	11629	536

Source: Nepal Police Women and Child Service Directorate

\*Others include cases related to abortion, polygamy, child marriage, and witchcraft

Stress Disorder. Moreover, the loss of social support that women usually have during ‘normal’ times may also prevent women from recovering. A study found that among the survivors, in the medium term, one in three adults experienced symptoms of depression and distressing levels of anger. One in five engaged in hazardous drinking and one in ten had suicidal thoughts.<sup>39</sup>

In the absence of basic healthcare services, mental health has never been a priority in Nepal. Mental health issues may be attributed to misconceptions and superstitious solutions sought, especially among the illiterate. Many cross-cultural studies show that women most commonly suffer more depression and anxiety than men do following a disaster.<sup>40</sup> The mental health problem among women is so prevalent that a 2010 study had called suicide as the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age in Nepal.<sup>41</sup> A patriarchal society may treat women as second class citizens without any agency and independent identity forcing them to remain dependent on their significant other or parents for guardianship. And, victims of sexual, physical and emotional abuse from intimate partners are often 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.

Not only were the women affected by anxiety caused by their own fear of death, but they were also found to be affected by losing their loved ones, especially children, in the earthquake.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, loss of home and livelihood was found to have put greater burden upon women. The strain caused by an economically uncertain future also manifests into psychosocial problems like depression and anxiety.

## **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. Women are less prepared and less knowledgeable about the ways of dealing with disasters. Despite these constraints, women have been 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 depen-

dency on male family members. Thus, it is far more difficult for women to bounce back to the pre-disaster 'normal'.<sup>43</sup> In addition, single women find it harder to access government aid, which is laced with innumerable eligibility criteria and bureaucratic procedures. A gender-blind outlook of the policy setters, partially because relief and aid distribution are 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. It does not cover issues related to disaster management. Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, 2017 is much more comprehensive and recognizes both risk reduction and management as integral. Similarly, National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy and Strategic Action Plan, 2017-2030, which is forthcoming, will replace the existing strategy. It is also believed to be incorporating gender concerns in national actions. Despite these attempts, addressing gender and social inclusion concerns would require a strong legislative framework and an effective enforcement mechanism in place. During the 2015 disaster, the absence of women's representation was conspicuously absent in the relief coordination and decision-making committees at the community level.<sup>44</sup>

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 re-

construction. UN Women contributed in gender mainstreaming in PDNA, which includes a separate chapter on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion. 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. PDNA had assessed that gender mainstreaming would require a billion rupees in the total estimated amount of NPR 670 billion.

The PDRF document, that envisages the course of reconstruction, states that 'a coordinated and coherent approach will be implemented for effective mainstreaming of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion throughout recovery and reconstruction activities'. To attain gender-responsive, and socially-responsive reconstruction, PDRF aims to achieve meaningful participation of women, bring out targeted, protective and service-oriented programming for women and raise awareness and capacity of women and other vulnerable and marginalized groups.<sup>45</sup> Further, PDRF also mentions that it will actively monitor the number of women engaged in designing, planning and implementation of the reconstruction and recovery programme. The recommendation of the PDRF document regarding gender mainstreaming and social inclusion is estimated to spend NPR 4.6 billion over the 2016-2020 period. The amount was expected to be spent on establishing a gender equality and social inclusion unit at the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA).

Similarly, many humanitarian agencies came together to form an Inter-Cluster Gender Task Force to address women specific concerns that could be overlooked during relief and recovery. The task force contributed in preparing gender-responsive PDNA and PRDF documents to guide reconstruction. It frequently published its Gender Bulletin providing updates of the progresses as well as difficulties faced by women.<sup>46</sup> All the women-focused NGOs—at local and national levels—also contributed. They created safe spaces for women in the temporary camps, provided psychosocial and legal counselling, and helped deal with hygiene and sanitation issues. Non-government organizations formed a core group to draft and submit 'Common Charter of Demands by Women's Groups in Ne-

pal 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.<sup>47</sup>

Women need all round support to recover from the effects of the earthquake. A few basic services they 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 newly elected local government bodies will help the affected households in accessing these services.

Construction of shelters can be expensive. Arranging money and efforts required for construction is not easy for everybody. According to The Asia Foundation survey, widows were more likely than others to continue living in shelters and widowed women were less likely than others to have started rebuilding their damaged or destroyed homes.<sup>48</sup> 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. Women may not have social and political ties that could provide them with the necessary information. The media, especially radio programmes, have emerged effective here.

The earthquake has increased time-poverty among women that are already suffering from an unequal burden of housework and from their role as care giver to children and elderly members of the family. The loss of property in the earthquake also makes it necessary for them to be financially capable. Humanitarian organizations such as United Nations Development Programme, World Food Programme, International Organization for Migration and other international and national non-government organizations offered cash-for-work programmes in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This helped them survive during the most challenging times.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, women were provided with various skills through trainings for income generating activities, such as vegetable farming, seamstress training, hair styling and make-up tutoring, among other activities.

---

**Box 7.2**

---

## **Plight of female headed households**

In the Nepali society, being a single woman even during 'normal' times is not easy. The situation further worsens during disasters that tear down the social fabric and amplify vulnerabilities. Single women—a respectful manner of addressing widowed, divorced, separated or unmarried women above 35 years of age—face relatively more discrimination. In a patriarchal society, where every institutional relationship, including relationship between government and citizens, is handled via 'men in the family', single women have limited access in these matters. In addition, lack of access to property and insufficient means of sustenance leave single women economically fragile. In such a situation, damages inflicted by disasters make bouncing back increasingly hard for women.

Further, male emigration for jobs has increased the number of female-headed households (FHHs). Many affected districts are major areas sending international labour migrants. With the males and the youth of these communities gone abroad for work, most households are female-headed of which many only consist of elderly relatives and children. Even when men emigrate, it is women who have to look after family members and households in addition to performing the additional duties considered the traditional domain of men, such as managing finances, coordinating education and healthcare for family members, among other tasks. There may also be cases where men do not send money to sustain their families. Here, the burden of responsibilities for women gets doubled.

In the aftermath of Gorkha Earthquake, FHHs were reported to have faced difficulties while accessing relief. It is not that women are inherently helpless or incapable of taking care of themselves and their loved ones. Since access to and control over resources and information is tilted in favour of those with more power (men) and individuals with greater mobility (men and youth), these households faced and will continue to face significant difficulties accessing relief in the absence of sensitive and equitable relief distribution mechanisms.

Single women and FHHs faced problems right from the beginning. When damages to living spaces forced them to live in

temporary shelters, single women experienced greater hardships. 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, FHHs had also reported difficulty in accessing government relief and they also faced difficulty in clearing the rubble, according to a report prepared by Oxfam. Widowed women were found to be four percentage points more likely than others to continue living in shelters, according to The Asia Foundation's Impacts and Recovering Monitoring Study-Phase 4. The worst affected were elderly women who were left alone without any means to support themselves.

Lack of necessary documents to obtain relief is also a problem for female headed households. Citizenship is necessary to obtain land titles. It is mostly men of the household who obtain these documents. Since these tasks are mediated by husbands and other men in the family, the lack of information about the processes involved make obtaining the copies a daunting task for single women. In cases where husbands have migrated for work, and if the marriage is not registered or the marriage certificate lost, the wife has to rely on community verification for the document. This system is open to abuse. In case of polygamy, the estranged wife may not be able to receive reconstruction aid as land titles are in the name of the husband. According to a survey undertaken by Oxfam, 24.4 per cent women covered had reported lost property papers and about 49 per cent had lost their citizenship certificates.

---

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.<sup>50</sup> NRA and some international non-government organizations have been providing trainings to labourers for skills needed for reconstruction. Training more women in the sector would not only aid in expediting the rebuilding process, but also provide them with 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. Similarly, 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.

Gender based violence is a manifestation of deeper issues related to power relations between the victim and perpetrator. Empowering women by making them self-reliant is a step towards preventing men from taking undue advantage from women's helpless situation. Psychosocial counselling to 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 non-government organizations 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. Otherwise, women would rather not complain for fear of being shamed.

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 such as Women for Human Rights, Saathi and other INGOs are involved in providing psychosocial counselling to support women to overcome their difficulties. Providing such support to men is also beneficial as they too struggle to cope with

the consequences. Men's reputation as the 'stronger sex' puts additional psychological burden on them, as they need to work to maintain that image. Counselling helps ease anxiety and improve gender relations.

Delays in reconstruction of damaged infrastructures, such as healthcare, education and public facilities, are an added pressure on women. Disrupted school attendance affects vulnerable children the most. Girls sacrifice time allotted for study to take up the added chores. Further, damages to drinking water infrastructure—one of the main reasons for increased drudgery for women—force them to spend even longer hours than before in fetching water. Water supply for drinking and sanitation, even for irrigating farms, has drastically decreased after the earthquake. Many of natural springs were reported to have dried up.<sup>51</sup> 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. Nepal has tried to address the gender concerns from the very beginning. 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. It is worth exploring whether the attempts at mainstreaming gender in relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts ultimately helped towards building a resilient and gender-equal community. The reconstruction modality adopted for Gorkha Earthquake will be a guide for future disaster responses.

Gender responsive programmes must be devised based on their needs. 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 decisions on this data.

NRA was formed with the objective of carrying out post-earthquake rebuilding activities. Its executive committee has no representation of women. The government should have made significant effort to make such an important body gender-inclusive. Out of the total of 95 members in the Central Reconstruction Advisory Council, only two are women. There is no sufficient representation of women in the executive committee, directive committee, National Reconstruction Consultation Council and other bodies of the NRA. 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 Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) Unit, 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 programmes such as cash-for-work and trainings to impart skills. This gave rise to duplication. There were too many programmes in some areas while others did not see any. Here, coordination is needed among humanitarian agencies.

To mobilize women in community risk reduction and mitigation processes, women's groups such as *Ama Samuhas* and other microcredit self-help groups need to be actively involved in communicating the risks of hazards. This could enable communities to handle disasters, while making women adapt to activities that could minimize their vulnerabilities. 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.

---

Box 7.3

---

### Case study of Rasuwa

Rasuwa, situated in Himalayan Region of Bagmati Zone, is about 50 km north of Kathmandu. Rasuwa District has a total population of 43,300 out of which 50.4 per cent are female. There are 9,778 households, according to National Population Census 2011. Dhunche is the district headquarters. The Human Development Index for Rasuwa District is 0.461, while the national average is 0.490. Similarly, the adult literacy rate is only 41.32, while the national average is 59.57. The life expectancy of 70.91 years is a little higher than the average national life expectancy of 68.8 years.

The Rasuwa-Kerung border point has come into greater focus since August 2015. Post-earthquake Rasuwa has now become a land of opportunities, because it is being touted as the main border point between Nepal and China. The earthquake destroyed the existing Tatopani customs point in Sindhupalchok, 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. More than 250 containers pass through it every day. The main import items are readymade garments, apples, ladies' sandals, rubber materials, plastic footwear, handbags, leather shoes, motor batteries and plastic products. The key exports were metal handicraft, henna, toothpaste, cosmetic products, noodles, pasta, chocolate, woolen carpet, chewing gum and hair products. The earthquake has had a positive impact on the population of Rasuwa as opportunities for livelihood have increased. Labour migration for employment abroad is also limited (5.1 per cent men and 2.06 per cent women). 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 Rasuwa have also contributed in bringing prosperity to the people by making their assets more liquid.

## Initiating Dialogue on Post-Disaster Reconstruction

The earthquake displaced more people in this district than in other districts. It destroyed around 8,500 houses and displaced more than 2,000 people. Most of the victims have already moved back but some households are still living in the temporary settlements. Women have been confined to their houses due to insecurity and their responsibility towards children depriving them of income-earning activities, thus increasing their dependency on men.

The renewed hustle and bustle at the border has also increased the vulnerability of women as there are increased chances of sexual exploitation. Travelling across the border is risky mostly because they are unaware of Chinese laws against sexual harassment and 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.

---

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. It advocates designing, resourcing and implementing gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction policies, plans and programmes and adopting adequate capacity building measures to empower women for preparedness and for alternate livelihood means in post-disaster situations. 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 our 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 to prevent the rising 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. The media are a natural conduit for the purpose, but, then, at the same time, women's access to information also needs to be ensured. Information centres and help centres must also be established for this purpose. Psychosocial counselling is considered important in the aftermath of a disaster for women to face their problems better.

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 to capture livelihood options. Since many male and young members of their family have gone abroad for work, most households are headed by females. Targeting these women would mean securing livelihood opportunities for most of the households in disaster affected areas. There are less trained women masons because trainings provided for reconstruction is focused on enhancing technical know-how of the existing masons on constructing earthquake resistant houses. To include more women in the workforce, women should be provided basic trainings on skills such as masonry, carpentry, and so on. Similarly, steps should be taken to aid home-based workers, the majority of who 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. In the PDRF document, the GESI section has been allocated an estimated budget of NPR 4.6 billion for a five-year work plan that has nine planned priority programmes. This is a mere 0.55 per cent of the total estimated budget for reconstruction.<sup>52</sup>

The government could ensure women's access to cash transfers and other government benefits by helping them procure the necessary documentation. Documents are necessary for other

times as well, not just during reconstruction. However, the present is 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 (SDG 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 Sustainable Development Goal Three, 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. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Enarson, E. 2000. *Gender and Natural Disasters*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- <sup>2</sup> Blakie, P., Terry, C. and I. Davis. 1994. *At Risk: Natural Hazards and People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>3</sup> ICRC. 2006. "Please don't raise gender now -we're in an emergency!". *World Disaster Report 2006*. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.* Note 1.
- <sup>5</sup> GLOPP/ILO. 2008. "Gender Roles." ILO International Training Centre, Module on Gender, Poverty and Employment." Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Sociology Discussion. "Impact of Stereotyped Role in Women's Development". <http://www.sociologydiscussion.com/society/impact-of-stereotyped-role-in-womens-development-social-development/682>
- <sup>8</sup> Bradshaw, S. and M. Fordham. 2013. *Women, Girls and Disasters. A review for DFID*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/236656/women-girls-disasters.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236656/women-girls-disasters.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Government of Nepal. *Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal*. Accessed April 03, 2018. <http://drrportal.gov.np/incidentreport>.
- <sup>10</sup> Ikeda, K. 1995. "Gender differences in human loss and vulnerability in natural disasters: A case study from Bangladesh". *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2 (2): 171-93.

## Gender Concerns of Recovery and Reconstruction

- <sup>11</sup> Neumayer, E. and Plumper, T. 2007. "The gendered nature of natural disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981-2002". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97(3): 551-566.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> NDRI. 2016. *A study on the impact of Nepal's earthquake on women's livelihood, housing, land and property rights and citizenship rights*. Kathmandu: Nepal Development Research Institute.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.* Note 5.
- <sup>15</sup> NPC. 2015. *Post Disaster Needs Assessment 2015*. Kathmandu: National Planning Commission.
- <sup>16</sup> IFRC. 2015. *Unseen, unheard : Gender-based violence in disasters*. Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.* Note 9.
- <sup>18</sup> MOHP. 2012. *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2011*. Kathmandu: US Agency for International Development, New Era and Government of Nepal, Ministry of Health and Population.
- <sup>19</sup> OPMC. 2012. *A Study on Gender-Based Violence Conducted in Selected Rural Districts of Nepal Report to the Government of Nepal Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Data provided by Women and Children Service Directorate-Nepal Police.
- <sup>22</sup> IFRC. 2017. *Nepal Country Case Study*. Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- <sup>23</sup> Inter Cluster Gender Task Force (ICGTF). 2015. *Gender Equality Update No 1*. [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/gender\\_equality\\_bulletin\\_no\\_1\\_-\\_21\\_may\\_2015\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/gender_equality_bulletin_no_1_-_21_may_2015_final_0.pdf).
- <sup>24</sup> Parkinson, Debra. 2017. "Investigating the increase in domestic violence post disaster: an Australian case study." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 1-30.
- <sup>25</sup> Fothergill, A. 1999. "An exploratory study of woman battering in the Grand Forks flood disaster: Implications for community responses and policies." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 17: 79-98.
- <sup>26</sup> Phillips, B. D., & B. H. Morrow (Eds.). 2008. *Women and disasters: From theory to practice*. Philadelphia: International Research Committee on Disasters.
- <sup>27</sup> Inter Cluster Gender Task Force (ICGTF). 2015. *Gender Equality Update number 1*. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gender\\_equality\\_bulletin\\_no\\_1\\_-\\_21\\_may\\_2015.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gender_equality_bulletin_no_1_-_21_may_2015.pdf)
- <sup>28</sup> Post Report. 2015. "Four hundred women victimized during quake: WOREC." *The Kathmandu Post* November 27. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2015-11-27/four-hundred-women-victimized-during-quake-worec.html>

## Initiating Dialogue on Post-Disaster Reconstruction

- <sup>29</sup> NHRC. 2015. *Trafficking In Persons: National Report 2015/16*. Kathmandu: Nepal Human Rights Commission.
- <sup>30</sup> Standing, K., Parker, S., and S. Bista. 2016. *Grassroots responses to violence against women and girls in post-earthquake nepal: lessons from the field*. Gender & Development Volume 24 (2): 187-204.
- <sup>31</sup> Dulal, P. 2015. "Rape, abuse reported in encampments." *The Kathmandu Post* May 27. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2015-05-27/rape-abuse-reported-in-encampments.html>
- <sup>32</sup> Republica. 2017. "NHRC report shows rise in human trafficking post-quake". *Republica* July 05. <http://www.myrepublica.com/news/23137/>
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.* Note 27.
- <sup>34</sup> Chaudhary, P. et al. 2017. "Humanitarian response to reproductive and sexual health needs in a disaster: the Nepal Earthquake 2015 case study." *Reproductive Health Matters* 25(51):25-39.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Central Department of Population Studies. 2015. *Nepal Earthquake 2015: A socio demographic Impact Study*. Kathmandu: UNFPA and IOM. <http://www.cdps.edu.np/HighlightsNEQ.pdf>
- <sup>37</sup> UNFPA. 2016. *Dignity First*. Kathmandu: United Nations Population Fund.
- <sup>38</sup> Tong, K. 2015. *Child Marriage in Nepal after the Earthquake*. Plan International. <https://plan-international.org/blog/2015/06/child-marriage-nepal-after-earthquake>
- <sup>39</sup> Kane, J. C. et. al. 2017. "Mental health and psychosocial problems in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquakes: findings from a representative cluster sample survey." *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 27(3): 301-310.
- <sup>40</sup> Mocellin, Jane S.P. 1999. "Women in Disasters: An Overview and Lessons Learned for Central America." Paper prepared for the Inter-American Development Bank Technical Meeting on the Effects of Hurricane Mitch on Women and their Participation in the Reconstruction of Central America.
- <sup>41</sup> Himalayan News Service. 2010. "Suicide a leading cause of death among women, reveals study." *The Himalayan Times* January 24. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/suicide-a-leading-cause-of-death-among-women-reveals-study/>
- <sup>42</sup> UN Women. 2016. *Psychosocial counselling helps earthquake survivors in Nepal overcome loss*. March 29. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/psychosocial-counselling-helps-earthquake-survivors-nepal-overcome-loss>
- <sup>43</sup> *ibid.* Note 8.
- <sup>44</sup> MoHA. 2017. *Nepal Disaster Report: The Road to Sendai*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Ministry of Home Affairs.
- <sup>45</sup> NPC. 2016. *Post Disaster Reconstruction Framework 2016*. Kathmandu: National Planning Commission.
- <sup>46</sup> Inter Cluster Gender Task Force (ICGTF). 2015. *Gender equality bulleting*

## Gender Concerns of Recovery and Reconstruction

*special issue in response to the Nepal earthquakes – one month on.* May 25. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/gender-equality-bulletin-special-issue-inter-cluster-gender-task-force-response-nepal>

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/common\\_charter\\_of\\_demand\\_final\\_in\\_english.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/common_charter_of_demand_final_in_english.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> The Asia Foundation. 2017. *Independent Impacts and Recovery Monitoring Phase 4 Qualitative Field Monitoring: April 2017*. <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aid-and-Recovery-in-Post-Earthquake-Nepal-Qualitative-Field-Monitoring-April-2017.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Willits-King, B. and J. Bryant. 2016. *Scaling up humanitarian cash transfers in Nepal*. Working paper 503. London: Overseas Development Institute. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11288.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Bhattarai, B. 2016. "Women at work." *The Kathmandu Post* March 02. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2016-03-01/women-at-work-20160301085020.html>

<sup>51</sup> Khadka, D. And S. Thakuri. 2016. "Increasing severity of portable water aftermath of Gorkha earthquake with a case of Sindhupalchowk district, Nepal." *International Journal for Research and Development in Technology* Vol. 6(2): 2349-3585.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* Note 45.