

GENDERED VULNERABILITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN COASTAL AREAS OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores gender-related issues in disaster risk and management, focusing on the vulnerability of women, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, where cultural, socio-economic, and political factors exacerbate their exposure to natural disasters. Women in coastal regions, for instance, face additional challenges because their roles and contributions to disaster preparedness and recovery are often underrecognized in disaster management frameworks. The research highlights the disproportionate impact of disasters on women and girls, emphasizing their vulnerability to loss of life, livelihoods, and increased violence. It identifies key factors such as poor access to resources, lack of formal disaster management training, and gender-based divisions of labor, which hinder women's capacity to respond to and recover from disasters. The study also underscores the importance of involving women in disaster planning and decision-making processes to build more resilient communities. Through a qualitative approach, the research advocates for the integration of gender-sensitive strategies in disaster management, which not only address the vulnerabilities women face but also harness their capabilities in disaster risk reduction. The findings recommend increased participation of women in emergency planning, as well as community and household-level preparedness and capacity-building initiatives, to ensure more sustainable and inclusive disaster management practices.

Keywords: Gender, Disaster Management, Vulnerability, Women, Capacity Building

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters affect women, men, girls and boys differently. In fact, in many contexts, due to socio-economic conditions as well as cultural beliefs and traditional practices, women and girls are more likely to be excessively affected by disasters, including loss of life during and in the aftermath of disasters, loss of livelihoods and productive assets, and increased gender-based violence.

In many cases, women have limited access to formal disaster management mechanisms or to any kind of information and resources related to disaster preparedness and prevention. Furthermore, women's accumulated skills, experiences and capabilities in times of natural catastrophes are often not adequately identified, recognized and promoted, as women's participation in disaster risk reduction (DRR) decision-making processes at all levels throughout the world is particularly low. Hence, an effective gender-sensitive strategy should both help take better

into account women's vulnerabilities in specific cultures without forgetting to highlight women's potential and capabilities in order to prepare, confront, and recover from disasters.

In societies that are more inequitable, women tend to be at higher risks of disaster because of pre-existing disadvantages in social, economic, political, legal, and cultural status and opportunities (Mak, 2005; Deere and Doss, 2006; Seager, 2006; Terry 2009). This problem is particularly evident in developing countries like Nigeria where a higher proportion of the poor and those who lack access to resources and decision-making in information, finance, personal health, education, training, and rights, are women and girls Vlassoff, 1994; UNDP, 1995, 2007; UNESCO, 2012). Women's lack of training and education, for example, means that they are forced to work in low-wage informal sectors and earn lower income which may limit their ability to diversify their livelihood capabilities, or increase.

Women and children are particularly affected by disasters, accounting for more than seventy five percent of displaced persons. In addition to the general effects of natural disaster and lack of health care, women are vulnerable to reproductive and sexual health problems, and increased rates of sexual and domestic violence. Moreover, gender roles dictate that women become the primary caretakers for those affected by disasters – including children, the injured and sick, and the elderly – substantially increasing their emotional and material work load. Women's vulnerability is further increased by the loss of men and/or livelihoods, especially when a male head of household has died and the women must provide for their families. Post disaster stress symptoms are often but not universally reported more frequently by women than men. WHO 2019. Nigeria is regularly affected by multiple hazards such as floods and droughts. In 2012, Nigeria experienced a double shock of severe drought in the Northeast and widespread flooding that affected almost the entire country. The floods caused nearly \$17 billion in damages and losses in the 12 most-affected states, according to a GFDRR-supported post-disaster needs assessment (PDNA). Low-income households are the most vulnerable to weather-related natural disasters. Agriculture, which is heavily impacted by flooding and drought, serves as the main source of income for 80 percent of the rural poor. Furthermore, the rapid rise of urban poverty increases potential flood risk.

Climate change threatens to block pathways out of poverty in developing countries, especially in Africa (Lemos & Tompkins 2008). An increase in disasters no matter the level will threaten development gains (ISDR 2008). Climate change is also expected to intensify disaster risk in the coming decade by causing more frequent and intense hazard events and increasing vulnerability of prone communities to the existing hazards (ISDR 2008). However, more focus now is on the Sustainable Development Goals, one of which is to mitigate climate change and its impacts by building resilience and limiting climate-related hazards and natural disasters (UN 2017). The impacts of floods in Nigeria are similar to what is experienced in other countries of the world such as Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger (OCHA 2016), but the response may not be similar. Floods have led to tremendous losses of property, infrastructure, business and increased risk of diseases. For example, the Ogunpa

flood, which occurred in Ibadan in 2011, resulted in a tremendous number of casualties. It was documented that about 25% of households in Ibadan lost their livelihoods, as their businesses were adversely affected (WHO 2012). Similar to Ogunpa were floods in the states along the rivers Niger and Benue in 2012 and 2017, Lagos in 2011, 2012 and 2017 as well as the Niger Delta regions in 2012.

When floods occur as natural incidents away from human populations, they have numerous benefits (Opperman, Galloway & Duvail 2013). However, when flooding occurs in areas of significant human development, especially in densely populated areas, a natural incident becomes catastrophic. Immediately after floods, there is poor hygiene and an increased risk of disease outbreaks, especially among displaced people (WHO). Potable water may be contaminated by pollutants from overflowing sanitation facilities, resulting in increased risk of waterborne diseases such as typhoid fever, cholera, leptospirosis and hepatitis A (WHO). Often poor people are more vulnerable and most affected (Yamin 2014). Health outcomes of floods are categorised into long- and short-term effects (Alderman, Turner & Tong 2012). Mortality rates tend to increase up to 50% globally within the first year after a major flood incident and psychological distress lingers for up to 2 years post-flood disaster with a prevalence of 8.6% to 53% (Alderman et al. 2012).

Disaster and Gender Based Vulnerabilities

Before going to review academic definitions and concepts of disaster, the literal meaning of disaster is quite straight forwardly linking with losses of (human) life. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of disaster is "... a sudden accident of a natural catastrophe that causes great damage or loss of life." To understand a disaster, we need to understand the components of vulnerability of different groups of people, and relate these to the hazard risk. They added that disaster is also related to people's resilience, particularly to their livelihoods how quickly and easily they can resume activities that earn money or provide food and other basics. Cannon stated that at the severity of a disaster is, therefore, a reflection both of the location and intensity of the hazard, and the number of people of different levels and types of vulnerability. Further, he argued that vulnerability differs according to the „initial conditions“ of a person – how well-fed they are, what their physical and mental health and mobility are, and their morale and capacity for self-reliance.

Gender Issues in Disaster

Gendered experiences give women a distinctive starting point for critiquing familiar assumptions from the position of the oppressed. Fordham also stated that male-dominated management and universalized experiences of disasters have stimulated most gender research to focus on women specifically rather than on affected people including both men and women because of their relative invisibility in the whole process of disaster management. (Ariyabandu 2005) observed that gender based prejudices and cultural divisions mainly affect women. (Ariyabandu 2005) also noted that existing socio-structural biases mean women are always more vulnerable in

the aftermath of a disaster, in terms of security and safety. The magnitudes of disasters are partially influenced by political, economic and socio-cultural contexts. However, she added that mainstreaming gender into disaster reduction policies and measures translates that context into identifying the ways in which women and men are positioned in society.

Gendered Capacity and Mainstreaming Gender in Disaster

Women often hold vital social knowledge and vast untapped capacity for reducing community risk. It is also evident that women's survival and coping skills, their interpersonal networks and intimate care of most vulnerable among us and certainly their knowledge of environmental resources and ecosystems are all life savings in disasters. In Florida's hurricane Andrew, for example, poor, minority were the most at risk to the storm because they lacked power, status, resources. However, discrimination against women does not only accentuate women's vulnerabilities during disasters- it also wastes women's potential as source of resilience. According to the 23rd special session of UN General Assembly on Women in 2000 was focused on gender equality, development and peace for the twenty first century, and gender perspective in integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training (UN, 2000). Beside this, Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015 provides a clear commitment that can guide policy makers and the community at large to engage more systematically in reducing risk to disasters. It is evident that women-specific projects continue to play an important role in promoting gender equality.

Gender in Aid Distribution and Rehabilitation

The distribution of aid was unequal, in the sense that aid was directed towards male-headed households. It is evident that there was a lack of participation of women in post-disaster recovery planning. In addition, it is also noted that officials turned away some widows seeking compensation for their lost husbands because they could not produce the body. This simply shows what type of unexpected situation being faced by women at the time of disaster. According to (Oxfam 2005), widowed women had trouble in obtaining benefits and cash, due to the system that only gives out these benefits to the men as heads of the household. Relief workers in Bangladesh trying to get emergency food and clothing to women, for example, urge agencies to put more women in the field to circumvent cultural and other barriers to gender-fair assistance. It was observed that women were hardly consulted in decision-making on camp management and rebuilding houses. (Chew and Ramdas 2005) stated that, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, for example, women had no say in temporary housing design. As a result, dwellings actually were constructed without any kitchen facilities. In addition, there was no gender-differentiated data or gender analysis available of which relief organizations could make use during the planning and implementation of their projects and programmes.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that how many women's lives are made more difficult, and as a consequence, how they are made more vulnerable in disaster situations. It has been suggested that this is happening is due to the complexity of atmosphere where their activities are not properly recognized in disaster planning and management. However, literature showed that women, particularly belong to the poor families are primarily responsible for their domestic roles due to culturally dominated labour division. Findings from the study show that, on average, large natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than that of men.

The underlying cultural, social, and economic patterns that lead to a low socio-economic status of women and thereby generate their specific vulnerability to disasters are not easy to deal with. Finally, in conclusion of this essay, it can be noted that the impact of disaster is gendered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested by this paper.

1. It is recommended that women should be involved in emergency planning and disaster management process through ensuring their active participation. The inclusion of greater number of women in the emergency management profession could help in the long term to address disaster risks.
2. Policymakers, nongovernmental organizations, and the academic community need to pay closer attention to the gendered nature of disaster vulnerability women for improving socio-economic status of women. Such attention should focus on the special medical, economic, and security needs of women in the aftermath of disasters as well as on mechanisms to ensure fair and nondiscriminatory allocation of relief resources. However, developing such initiatives will not entirely prevent the adverse impact of large-scale disasters on women in societies where their everyday socio-economic status is low. But, assumed, it can reduce the excess mortality of women as well as their exposure to disasters compared to that of men in future.
3. There should be network for interactions between student groups, teachers and nongovernmental organizations and agency on environmental sustainability.
4. Some subjects taught in the primary and secondary schools on environmental education could be made compulsory for all students especially girls. Also, at the tertiary level, more students need to be encouraged to take courses on environmental education. At the informal level, information and training about managing and sustaining the environment could be packaged for them.
5. Government could enact effective environmental laws and policies to ensure sustained environmental protection. Policies on environmental education will also compel the introduction and teaching of some core courses on environmental education for all females.

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