

Book review

Women, gender, and disaster: global issues and initiatives

Elaine Enerson and P G Dhar Chakravarti (eds), Sage, 2009

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This is a collection of articles that addresses the issue of gender-differentiated impact of natural disasters in countries across the world. It argues for the need to integrate gender perspectives into disaster management processes—both in terms of disaster response and disaster risk reduction.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section, comprising four articles, seeks to understand the ramifications of gender relations in disaster situations. The second section, consisting of nine articles, looks at gender challenges and responses under various kinds of disaster situations. The third section has seven papers that review recent women's organized initiatives in natural disasters in different countries. The five articles put together in the fourth and final section of the book—under the heading 'gender sensitive disaster risk reduction'—assess the processes through which gender sensitivity in disaster management can actually reduce the impact of natural disasters on affected communities.

The primary premise around which the articles are woven is that the nature of risk and impact of any natural disaster is usually different for men and women, and so is the pattern of response to it. Most of these differences arise out of the prevailing gender differences in pre-disaster situations—some due to biological differences, but mostly due to socially constructed gender norms and practices.

Several examples of this phenomenon is provided in the book's second section. Women are particularly vulnerable to floods, simply because in many communities women are not taught to swim. Moreover, they will not touch or be touched by a male, thereby making rescue work difficult during floods. In many developing societies, including those in South Asia, women are brought up with a socially ordained compulsion for overwhelming physical modesty and privacy, which hamper efficient rescue work and make life doubly difficult for women in the cramped post-disaster relief camps. Pregnant and lactating women and women with small children have additional problems, as evinced by research study in Bangladesh. In societies plagued by high levels of domestic violence against women in pre-disaster times, the incidence of violence is likely to rise substantially during natural disasters, as the articles from Sri Lanka and New Zealand testify. There are instances where such calamities are ascribed to the 'sins committed by the women' of the community, as the article reviewing the situation of women in earthquake-ravaged Pakistan reports, thereby adding insult and ignominy to the physical agony brought about by the natural catastrophe. Even in relatively affluent countries, women tend to bear a greater burden of the psychological stress brought about by disasters, as depicted in the paper from Canada.

The nine articles included in section 2 of the book demonstrate how women are viewed as passive recipients of aid and relief assistance, rather than potentially valuable active participants and agents in the process of relief operations, thereby rendering relief work significantly ineffectual. Yet there are many examples of what organized women's initiatives can achieve, and have indeed succeeded in achieving, under such stressful situations, as the articles in section 3 of the book reveal.

The book is of great help to those involved in the design and management of natural disasters. Yet, in some sense, it seems to suffer from an identity crisis. It appears to this reviewer that the editors were not completely clear about their intended audience. If one presumes that the book is targeted mainly—if not only—to disaster management experts and not to gender experts, then section 1 of the book should have been written and designed differently. At least a couple of the papers in the section are written in a style that may be familiar for those aware of certain segments of feminist discourse currently in

vogue, but will appear obtuse to others. The only piece that stands out in this section is the one by Mishra on the need for not equating 'gender' with 'women', and to look at gendered implications of natural disasters on men's needs as well. One would have liked to see how these ideas could have been operationalized in terms of concrete measures.

The article that according to this reviewer is the most useful is the last one by P G Dhar Chakravarti, one of the two editors of the volume. It puts together a sensible set of measures—a tool kit—in practical, no-nonsense, and intelligible terms, which tells the reader what needs to be done, by whom, and how to go about doing it under specific conditions. This is a useful checklist that all disaster management experts need to have in front of them while designing policy packages, and relief workers need to carry with them on the field.

By and large, the book is a useful collection, and the set of ideas contained in it should constitute an essential ingredient in the design and policy of disaster management.