

## Natural Disaster Reduction: Lessons on Empowering Women

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There has been an increase in the occurrence of natural disasters in the past two decades. That women are disproportionately affected by these disasters has long been acknowledged but their role in preventing and mitigating the effects of natural disasters is less well explored. What lessons can we learn from past disasters about the role of women?

Since 1990, October 10 has been marked annually as the United Nations International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction. The observance of this Day is aimed at drawing attention to the need for strategies for disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation.

Changes in global weather patterns have been attributed to human activity. Not everyone agrees on the extent to which human beings are responsible for these changes, but it is clear that the impact of individuals and communities on their immediate environment can have far reaching consequences at a global level. Sustainable development is key to addressing environmental concerns and therefore natural disasters. Women in most rural areas of the world directly harness natural resources for their families' livelihoods. They fetch water, gather firewood and till land.

Their ability to do this in a way that is sustainable for development is compromised by several factors. For instance, sustainable development measures often require not only financial investment and technical know-how, but even basic awareness which many do not have. Building women's environmental management capacities both in terms of knowledge and financial resources is therefore critical.

When natural disasters occur, poor people, and specifically poor women are usually the hardest hit. It is estimated that in the 2004 tsunami three times as many women as men died. [1] One of the reasons why more women perish is their decreased mobility since they often have not only themselves to take care of, but also children and the elderly. Due to socially constructed roles, most have never learned how to swim. [2]

Women who are farmers and informal traders are also disproportionately impacted in terms of economic loss. Natural disasters tend to increase women's already considerable economic and domestic responsibilities. In the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka a survey showed that a significant number of households gained new members as a result of the tsunami of 2004. After Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998 there was a reported doubling in the number of women solely maintaining their households, which in Nicaragua even one year after the hurricane translated into about forty percent of households. [3]

Early warning systems are critical to reducing the impact of floods, droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis and other disasters. However, the ways in which warnings are relayed typically disadvantage women and their ability to respond to the disasters. For example in one fishing village in Peru prior to an extreme El Nino Southern Oscillation, fishermen had been forewarned and therefore knew that for some months they would not be able to catch sufficient fish. However the women of the village, who manage household budgets, did not receive any warnings and were caught unawares.

For socio-cultural reasons men did not tend to discuss such issues with their wives, nor did they alter their spending to plan for the coming disaster. Had women been warned they are likely to have budgeted differently, saved money and been better prepared economically. On the other hand in 1998 in Hawaii during another El Nino event, women were targetted with early warning information which included information about treating drinking water. This reduced the incidence of diarrhoeal disease.

[4] Effective early warning systems that impart timely information directly to women give them the power to substantially mitigate the effects of natural disasters. The medium through which information is passed is vitally relevant. A study found that women farmers in South Africa preferred seasonal climate forecast information to be relayed by extension workers or through schools rather than the radio, which was the preferred medium of men. Men have greater access as well as more time to listen to radios. [5]

The increased incidence of sexual and domestic violence is yet another way in which women are affected in post-disaster situations. After Hurricane Mitch there was an increase in domestic violence while it has been reported that after the Loma Prieta earthquake in the US state of California reported cases of sexual violence increased by about 300%. [6] Women's groups and NGOs have not simply accepted increased violence as a by-product of disasters; they have been proactive in mitigating possible violence. In the aftermath of Mitch there were concerted community campaigns to pre-empt attacks on women. [7] This can be replicated in other disaster situations.

Women are typically portrayed as passive victims of natural disasters. However this is not the true picture; they commonly respond resourcefully to disasters, even when they are not prepared for them. Still, there is a need for the deliberate and sustained involvement of women in disaster management. Discussions around natural disaster reduction are incomplete without the integration of women. The experience of the 2004 tsunami created a small but significant space for Sri Lankan women to be involved in reconstruction decision-making. [8] This is something that needs to be built upon. Past natural disaster experiences have highlighted the need for the equal participation of women as well as the incorporation of women's perspectives in all discussions around climate change, environmental management, disaster mitigation and recovery.

1. Emmanuel Sarala 'Sri Lankan Women's Small but Significant Gains in the Post Tsunami Reconstruction Process.' [http://www.apwld.org/tsunami\\_reconstruction.htm](http://www.apwld.org/tsunami_reconstruction.htm)

2. See AWID 2006 'Disasters are never gender neutral: What have we learned?' [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org).

3. 'Women, disaster reduction and sustainable development.' Paper prepared by the Inter-agency Secretariat for the International strategy for Disaster Reduction, Geneva.

4. According to a fact sheet prepared by the Women's Edge Coalition. [www.womensedge.org](http://www.womensedge.org).

[http://www.wunrn.com/news/2007/10\\_07/10\\_22\\_07/102207\\_natural.htm](http://www.wunrn.com/news/2007/10_07/10_22_07/102207_natural.htm)