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The issues discussed in this volume have become increasingly salient with the rise of large-scale disasters since 2005. The editors have provided a useful overview of some of the discussions in the academic and practitioner communities around problems resulting from gender-blind policy and research, as well as examples of programs instituted after several different disasters.

The volume is divided into four parts: Understanding Gender Relations in Disaster, Gendered Challenges and Responses in Disaster, Women’s Organized Initiatives, and Gender-sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction. The first section provides some vocabulary and a basic understanding of the issues at hand. The second and third sections provide concrete examples for study of policies and programs that have varied in their levels of success. The last section contains practical material tying gender-based intervention with comprehensive disaster risk reduction, and provides many excellent suggestions for governments, agencies, and NGOs to consider for adoption.

The range of topics discussed is so broad that it is difficult to summarize, but the attempt must be made. Broadly speaking, it is agreed that males and females differ in their risk of harm in disasters, and in their responses to that risk. Policies and programs must take these differences into account, just as they should take into account economic, ethnic and religious differences. These differences are not all negative; in some cases women have higher adaptive capacities or are less exposed to physical danger than men. Sometimes men have the advantage, and it is up to the program designers and policy makers to understand the specifics of each situation, so as to avoid counterproductive actions.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the theoretical basis for the volume. In Chapter 1, Madhavi Malalgoda Ariyabandu covers the basic gender issues in disaster studies, whereas Chapter 2 applies this awareness to the disaster risk reduction framework.

Many of the most serious problems after disasters have to do with physical security, both in camps and in less damaged areas. Lack of lighting, lack of police and lack of basic sanitation provisions for women repeatedly arise. Women are exposed to physical violence even more than usual after disasters, but we seem to lack the reliable data on incidence of abuse and rape that might prompt governments and intergovernmental agencies to build safer camps and provide the basic protections women need. It is to be hoped that this book will alert shelter and temporary housing providers to the problem,
and will prompt researchers to undertake the difficult task of documenting the baseline levels of gender-based violence and the post-disaster levels, across a wide variety of regions and cultures.

Most of the book addressed women’s issues, but the third chapter was devoted to looking at the men’s perspective: “Let’s share the stage: Involving men in gender equality and disaster risk reduction.” The author argues that men face socialization processes and cultural norms that lead to a breakdown in their self-esteem when they fail to “make the masculine grade” (p. 31), and that no progress will be made on gender equality until men are included in the discussion. Although there are exceptions, most decisions and money are still controlled by men so it will be up to them to initiate the changes that may reduce their power and privilege. Ironically, the exceptions the author mentions are conflict regions, where war and genocide have changed the sex ratios and produced such a large surplus of women that they have taken over many traditionally male positions of leadership and men are forced to take over “women’s work” such as cooking and cleaning. This situation also occurred in post-WWI Europe but did not result in much visible change until later in the 20th century.

Chapter 4 provides historical documentation of the Honolulu Call to Action, the result of the International Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction Workshop in 2004. The Call to Action was drafted based on the recommendations of the workshop and presented at the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Kobe, 2005. Following the Kobe conference, The Gender and Disasters Network was recognized as a delegation to the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Geneva, 2007. These opportunities have inserted gender firmly into the global high-level conversation on disaster risk reduction.

Chapter 5 opens the second section of the book with a report on efforts made in the Himalayas to improve community resilience. This is of course a region with high levels of hazard exposure, and its isolation has contributed to social stratification and gender inequality. Examples from Nepal, northern India, northern Pakistan, and northwestern India show that programs that address the community as a whole and work with existing local bodies are most likely to have positive effects. The examples also show that it is possible and indeed useful to change tradition and culture, when the communities initiate the changes as part of a program of sustainable development.

In Chapter 6, the Nicaraguan post-earthquake reconstruction effort is examined. Although reconstruction was supposed to involve women’s participation, a lack of attention to defining the specifics of that participation reduced the possibility of improving women’s status and security. Chapter 7 provides a brief overview of the gender perspective on environment and disaster in the Middle East. Cultural and religious norms in the region seem to be promoting a “separate but equal” model for handling women’s issues in development and disaster management.

Chapter 8 describes a study of agency responses to a flood in Whakatane, New Zealand, a predominantly Maori community. The authors interviewed personnel from
eight agencies that provided various disaster response and recovery services. The amount of domestic violence increased after the disaster, as reflected in higher numbers of calls to police and other agencies. Financial stresses seemed to contribute to the increase, although there were structural problems with the agencies as well. For example, communications lines within and between agencies were very weak, and some agencies reduced their service provision levels so quickly after the event that others had difficulties in filling the gaps. The study once again shows that service providers and governmental agencies need to do their own emergency planning to avoid failing their communities when they are most needed.

Chapter 9 reports on a well-designed study of parenting after Hurricane Katrina that focuses on the different roles of men and women in caregiving and how they changed during the recovery period. Gender based roles dominated throughout the period, and single parents, both men and women, have more difficulties than two-parent households. The authors call for more and better childcare services and also for shelter options for families with special needs. These findings are quite similar to the problems uncovered in the study of the Great Hanshin Earthquake reported in Chapter 10. The income of female-headed households in Japan is estimated to be 30% lower than that of two-parent families, and many government policies penalized single women with families as they looked for new housing. The situation in Pakistan as described in Chapter 11 was even more difficult, partly because of the already low status of women and the poor in this country dominated by a feudal elite and the military. Pakistan ranks 100 out of 102 countries in the UNDP’s Gender Development Index (p. 143). Superstitious reactions to the disaster such as blaming women for the earthquake (due to their alleged immorality) were not uncommon. Camps were unsafe and unsanitary, and many families married their young daughters to widowed older men, interrupting the children’s educations. Monetary aid was distributed according to patriarchal norms with little recognition of the worth or rights of women.

An unusual study of a slow-onset economic disaster, the bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE) epidemic in Canada, Chapter 12 is an ethnographic study of rural Manitoba. The study is marred by the small sample size (eight women), but it shows that patriarchal systems are alive and well in the developed world. Women felt helpless to affect both micro and macro level policy. The author recommends support for women’s groups to improve networking, provide education for women on agricultural issues, and allow women to be represented at the policy table. Chapter 13 is also a study of events in Canada, in this case the 2003 SARS epidemic. The authors claim that gender segregation in health occupations had a negative effect on information flow and thus on public safety. Health care providers were in the unenviable position of providing needed services and being praised in the abstract but punished personally by shunning behaviors of a frightened citizenry.
The third section of the book is also composed of a series of case studies, mostly non-configurative (see Verba 1967), focusing on organizations founded and run by women. Chapter 14 is a solid qualitative study of disaster risk reduction efforts by women in El Salvador. The study shows that women have been successful to the extent that they organize not only around disasters, but also around the broader issues of food and nutrition. “It makes more sense to organize on the basis of what people recognize as everyday, pressing risks, rather than on the basis of the risk of a disaster, which, by comparison, may be a distant threat. It is the process of organizing that is important…” (p. 181, italics mine).

Chapter 15 describes work by NGOs in India and Turkey. These organizations grew out of social movements and both do development work. Their disaster response work arose after large disasters occurred in their respective countries. They have been able to meet and share expertise as members of the Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood. “Peer learning exchanges” were used at the local level as well, and were successful in building capacity. Chapter 16 is a study of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India. Founded in 1972 with a membership of over 690,000 workers, it is one of the largest groups studied in this volume. SEWA has shown that women are not merely victims of disasters but can be agents for improving their communities through a focus on livelihoods.

The Kenyan “movement for the commons” (Chapter 17), shows how Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement and women’s resistance to the holding of large numbers of political prisoners by the ruling party have demonstrated the potential women have to alter development decisions, reduce income inequality, and change farming practices, thus improving food distribution and increasing resilience among the population. Chapter 18 shows that violence against women in Sri Lanka after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami was the impetus for existing organizations to form the Coalition for Assisting Tsunami Affected Women. This coalition highlighted the problem, and made demands for appropriate preventive action by the authorities. A great deal of work is needed in this area, first to collect stronger data and then to implement existing policy suggestions that could significantly reduce the incidence of gender-based violence.

Chapter 19 moves the scene to Montserrat and the response to the Soufrière Hills volcanic eruptions. The chapter argues that despite a lack of support from the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency, women in the region “have a long history of leading at the national level in the public administration sector” (p. 256). This leadership was evident as communities had to be rebuilt under very stressful conditions, including outmigration. Chapter 20 addresses the chronic drought conditions faced by inhabitants of Brazil’s “drought polygon” and the strategies women have historically employed to survive the periodic droughts. Although less organized than the women in the other chapters of this section, northeastern women have long used two main strategies: migration (mostly to the more prosperous south, but since the late 1950s also to Brasilia
and its environs) and political involvement. Outmigration allows migrating women to earn and control an income, sending some back to their families. Older women often stay behind and take over traditionally male responsibilities to manage farms and make family decisions.

The final section of the book contains three more case studies and two chapters of plans and tools for “mainstreaming gender in disaster risk reduction, climate change policies and practices and emergency management” (p. 273). Chapter 21 considers the history and future of attempts to link gender equity and comprehensive disaster risk management in Mexico, while Chapter 22 looks at gender and climate change policy at the international level. Chapter 23 is a study of the actions of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami.

Although Chapters 24 and 25 could be considered “wish lists” of policy suggestions, they contain many excellent ideas that decision makers should seriously address. Any government would do well to take a close look at the 57 steps in Chapter 24 that show how the Hyogo Framework for Action could be implemented. The toolkit offered in Chapter 25 is also an excellent list of potentially system changing policies and programs.

Like many edited volumes, the quality of the chapters varies. There are two dimensions of variation in this book: the quality of the studies (data sources, methods, theoretical understanding) and the quality of the writing. The first one is more difficult to control, but a tighter editing process could have reduced the second source of variation. I found it frustrating that some of the empirical studies did not pay enough attention to interactions between variables, that is, the way social class, ethnicity, religion, age and education may interact with gender to produce surprising results. We must not fall into the trap of thinking of all women as alike, any more than all men are, or all poor people, etc.

With all its flaws, this is an important collection of studies that will serve as a source of ideas for researchers and practitioners for a long time to come. The bottom line is that prevailing traditional roles “are not a sufficient basis for planning or executing programmatic interventions” (p. 281). We cannot continue on the path of neglecting half of humanity’s rights and responsibilities and create the kind of resilient communities we claim to desire.

Reference