




Women's Rights in Natural Disasters: *A Gendered Perspective*



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Introduction

Natural disasters affect all members of society, however, it is a misconception that their impacts are indiscriminate. Groups of people who are marginalised are more vulnerable, either socially, economically, culturally, politically, or institutionally, being impacted in more severe ways (Dagousset, 2020). Among these vulnerabilities, it is widely observed that natural disasters possess huge gendered consequences.

It is known that women and girls constitute a more vulnerable group in society, due to discriminatory laws and practices, and gender stereotypes, creating an unequal power relationship with men that limits their autonomy, access to resources, labour, education, health, decision-making, and justice (Dagousset, 2020). This vulnerability is further enhanced in a natural disaster or post-disaster scenario (Dagousset, 2020). It is demonstrated that natural disasters disproportionately kill women and girls; for instance, in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, 70 percent of the fatalities were women, and Cyclone Gorky killed 14 women for every man (Howe, 2019).

Based on these premises, the present report will be divided into four sections. The first section will address the main instruments and provisions in international law that can assist women in a natural disaster scenario. Then, the report will move to a deeper analysis of the gendered consequences in the context of natural disasters, including impacts on their chances of survival as well as the post-disaster implications. The third section will address case studies of natural disasters in different regions of the world, demonstrating the different impacts on women, and possible measures that could have been (or were) taken to address this inequality. Finally, the report will also provide recommendations based on the conclusions achieved, contributing to better guidance and preparedness on the issue of gender in natural disasters.

Legal Framework and International Law Protection

More often than not, disasters result in serious violations of a variety of human rights, with the rights to life, to private and family life, and to property being the most at risk (Sommario & Venier, 2018). When a gendered approach is taken, it is observed that women and men are affected differently by disasters and climate change, with many women and girls experiencing greater risks, burdens, and impacts after disasters (CEDAW, 2018).

In times of crisis, existing gender inequalities are amplified and women's rights are considerably infringed upon. State inaction in the face of these violations have steered human rights bodies to address this issue and guidelines have been set forward in order to ensure a human rights-based approach to disaster management (Sommario & Venier, 2018). Legislation plays an important role in achieving gender equality and protecting women's rights in disaster situations, through mandating a gender-sensitive disaster risk management. An international framework of norms in this regard would prove to be an important source of guidelines for national legislation to draw upon when regulating gender issues in disaster situations and to strive towards gender equality in the broader sense.

Although there is a lack of binding international treaties that directly create specific obligations at the national level on disaster risk management in line with a human rights-based approach, there are international norms established by agreement (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2021). Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 is a key instrument in this regard. As the successor of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World (1994) and the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, the Sendai Framework is the first disaster risk reduction instrument to adopt a human rights centred approach, stating that disaster risk reduction activities should be carried out while promoting and protecting all human rights (Sommario & Venier, 2018).

Regarding women's rights, the Sendai Framework's most important reference to women's involvement in disasters is stated in para. 36(a)(i) as:

Women and their participation are critical to effectively managing disaster risk and designing, resourcing and implementing gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction policies, plans and programmes; and adequate capacity building measures need to be taken to empower women for preparedness as well as to build their capacity to secure alternate means of livelihood in post-disaster situations.

Other key references to gender are made in para. 19(d) with regards to the integration of adopting a gender perspective in all policies and practices, also touching upon the leadership of women and youth; and para. 32 which states that "empowering women and persons with disabilities to publicly lead and promote gender equitable and universally accessible response, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction approaches is key" (UNISDR, 2015).

Apart from the Sendai Framework, the work of other UN human rights bodies and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) also play an important role in laying out general guidelines on addressing gender issues in disasters (Sommario & Venier, 2018). The right to disaster risk reduction is not specifically mentioned in international human rights law, but the practice of some UN human rights bodies and the case law of the ECtHR have put forward a set of obligations that parallels those of the Sendai Framework (Sommario & Venier, 2018).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) constitutes the main and most important binding international human rights protection for women. It sets out key principles for equality and a guidance for national stakeholders to prevent discrimination against women (CEDAW, 2018). It is also a crucial source for countries making and implementing gender-sensitive disaster risk management legislation, as it recognizes the impacts of disasters and climate change on women's rights, and identifies the need for international standards to provide a framework to strengthen the inclusion and resilience of women in disaster situations (ADB, 2021).

As the main UN human rights body focusing on the protection of women's rights and tackling issues of gender equality, the CEDAW Committee put forward the General Recommendation No. 37 on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change. This General Recommendation is an important source of international soft law on disaster risk in relation to women and the product of the efforts of CEDAW to identify the need for international standards to strengthen the protection of women's rights and women's inclusion pre, during, and post-disaster situations. It provides guidance on how to interpret and apply the CEDAW in disaster risk management and climate change actions, as well as emphasising the impact of preexisting gender inequalities that increase the risk to women's rights and of gender based violence in disaster situations (ADB, 2021). To adopt a gender-based approach in disaster management and ensure the protection of women's rights, the General Recommendation suggests focusing on equality and nondiscrimination in all actions, women's participation and inclusion throughout the disaster management process, and highlights the importance of data collection, monitoring and assessment of laws (CEDAW, 2018).

Although not directly addressing the situation of women in disasters, ECtHR case law offers further clarification on the disaster risk reduction obligations falling upon States bound by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Sommario & Venier, 2018). In four landmark cases — *Oneryildiz v Turkey* (2005), *Budayeva and Others v. Russia* (2014), *Kolyadenko and others v Russia* (2013), and *Ozel and others v Turkey* (2015)— the Court found that States had violated their positive obligations under the rights to life as a result of the failure to take the necessary disaster risk reduction measures such as informing of a disaster risk in a timely and accessible manner (Sommario & Venier, 2018). The human rights-based approach adopted by the relevant case law and other international legal norms mentioned above provides an important framework and starting point on tackling disaster management from a gendered perspective and addressing women's rights violations in disasters.

Gendered Consequences of Natural Disasters: Effects of Disasters on the Human Rights of Women and Girls

Regarding the gendered consequences of natural disasters, there are five major factors that cause women to be affected more severely from the impacts of disasters. These are as follows:

- Health and hygiene
- Gendered labour division
- Lack of economic resources
- Violence against women and girls in the aftermath of disasters
- Gendered cultural norms

Each factor will be analysed in depth with examples below.

1.1. Health and Hygiene

Women possess specific health needs in comparison to men, due to factors such as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Therefore, violations of women's right to health occur regularly, which is particularly prevalent in developing countries (Dagousset, 2020).

Gender discrimination is also an aspect that increases difficulties for women to access health services. For instance, women can be denied access to services that are uniquely necessary for them, such as contraceptives and family planning services, or are required to obtain the authorisation of a third party before receiving certain services (Dagousset, 2020). The difficulties for women's access to health services are also related to "deeply ingrained patriarchal concepts and attitudes that restrict women's physical aptitudes and sexuality to their ability to reproduce" (Dagousset, 2020, p. 12). These beliefs lead to harmful practices affecting women's and girls' health, including early marriage and pregnancies, genital mutilation, forced sterilization, and forced abortion (Dagousset, 2020).

As such, it is observed that these factors can contribute to an exacerbation of how women are affected by natural disasters and can pose additional problems in post-disaster scenarios. Firstly, it is identified that women's reproductive roles constitute a factor that can limit their chances of survival, as those in the final stages of pregnancy and women with young kids are less mobile (ADB, 2014).

Also, natural disasters cause a disproportionately negative effect on women's life expectancy. In regular situations, women live about 4.7 years on average longer than men. However, in a study conducted from 1981 to 2002, it was found that natural disasters lower women's life expectancy more than men's. This is due to either killing women more than men directly, or indirectly, "by killing women at an earlier age due to higher morbidity and more severe economic impacts" (Erman, 2021, p. 19).

In post-disaster situations, women's specific needs also create unique health impacts, such as women's reproductive and maternal health. It is found that damaged health facilities, disrupted infrastructure, and diminished economic resources negatively affect access to reproductive healthcare and modern contraception. Therefore, many health outcomes for women are compromised, interrupting women's access to modern contraception, family planning, feminine hygiene products, and maternal care (Erman, 2021).

Limited access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health care and clean water, can be detrimental to menstruating, pregnant, or nursing women (Dagousset, 2020). Particularly, pregnancy and childbirth are factors that make women more vulnerable in a post-disaster scenario, as reproductive health services are necessary in evacuation and post-disaster shelters. (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, n.d.) Furthermore, it is observed that "if basic health care infrastructure is severely damaged and access to obstetrical care is limited, chances of miscarriage as well as maternal and infant mortality increase" (ADB, 2014, p. 1).

As an example of such health implications, after the earthquake in Haiti, the use of contraceptives was reduced, resulting in increased pregnancy, including unwanted pregnancy. It is suggested that "the impact of the disaster may have changed intrahousehold power dynamics, as women in most affected areas were less successful at negotiating condom use in their partnerships" (Erman, 2021, p. 22). Moreover, another example is found in the Philippines, where "59 percent of villages reported an increase in early pregnancy since Typhoon Haiyan and 87.8 percent of women expressed concerns relating to their lack of access to feminine hygiene products" (Dagousset, 2020, p. 30).

Natural disasters also cause immense impacts on people's mental health. Particularly, women show a higher propensity towards depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders. Studies demonstrate that, after a disaster, women have higher chances of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. However, the reasons for such differentiation are not well understood. It is found that some factors that might contribute to higher PTSD rates include the type of trauma experienced, such as sexual and gender-based violence, and insufficient social support resources for managing trauma-related symptoms (Erman, 2021).

Gendered Labour Division

Gendered labour division is also a factor that severely influences how women are affected by natural disasters and post-disaster scenarios. Due to gender stereotypes, women are often put in a position of caregivers, are responsible for domestic work, and are viewed as the primary persons obligated to fulfil home and childcare functions. However, this can make them more vulnerable, as housework is largely unpaid and rarely acknowledged as valuable work. This can prevent women from pursuing education, which would facilitate access to the labour market, and reduce their time available for leisure, relaxation, and self-care (Dagousset, 2020).

Even when women enter the labour market they can be disadvantaged, as they still “continue to spend more time on domestic work than men, restricting their access to full-time employment and giving them less time for further education or training and therefore limiting their opportunities to advance in the labor market” (Dagousset, 2020, p. 8).

This traditional division of labour can put women at a disadvantage in natural disaster scenarios. Since women are normally allocated the responsibilities of caregiving, due to patriarchal social norms, they often stay behind during disasters to look after children and elderly relatives (Dagousset, 2020).

Before a disaster, women's and girls' caregiving responsibilities may prevent them from evacuating. It is said that “women and girls usually have the primary responsibility for caring for a home and the people in it including children, older family members and people with disabilities”. For instance, it was found that, in New Orleans, after the mandatory evacuation was issued, about 80 percent of the people left were women, despite representing only 54 percent of the population of the city (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, n.d.).

In Nepal, it was identified that women and girls represented 55 percent of deaths in the 2015 earthquakes. A factor that contributed to such a result is gendered labour division, as women were more likely to be inside their homes at the time due to gender roles in families, and many women with care responsibilities delayed their escape to rescue children, older family members, and family valuables. Also, there was a higher prior migration of men than women away from the affected areas to seek work (ADB, 2021).

In the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, in two regions of Aceh, Indonesia, women represented between 77 and 80 percent of all deaths. In Cuddalore, India, women represented 66 percent of all deaths. This difference in the ratio was also due to the fact that, due to their different work routines and locations, women and men were predominantly in different locations at the time of the disaster (ADB, 2021). It was found that many women were at home while men were out at sea fishing. This division contributed to their higher mortality as the waves gathered height and strength when they approached the shore, which led to the most fatal impact being at the coast where many women were located (Dagousset, 2020).

Furthermore, after a disaster, women will likely be responsible for taking care of the sick and injured, while maintaining daily chores. This situation is aggravated if the main breadwinner is killed during the disaster, which can lead women to seek outside employment and girls to be pulled from school to take care of the household (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, n.d.).

Women's role in the family and community is still recognised as marginal. As such, after a disaster, such as a cyclone or floods, a lot of pressure is put on women to keep family members together, take care of those affected by disasters, and feed them (Alam & Rahman, 2014).

In addition, it is identified that, after a disaster, women are more likely to face unemployment, re-enter the labour market or shift to self-employment. For instance, after Hurricane Katrina, it was found that women were less likely than men to keep their pre-hurricane employment. After Hurricane Mitch, it was also found that women had greater employment losses and were slower to re-enter the waged labour market (Erman, 2021).

These factors can be consequences of gendered labour division, as they can be results of the increase of domestic duties after a disaster, which tends to affect more women in comparison to men. As such, women tend to take up more responsibilities in managing post-disaster needs than men, including taking care of children and cleaning up after a flood. (Erman, 2021). As an example, after a flood in Dar es Salaam, in 2018, “it was observed that 60 percent of those who reported missing work due to the flood were women; and on average, women stayed home 17 days, while men stayed home 15.5” (Erman, 2021, p. 26). Also, in El Salvador, after the 2001 earthquake, it was found that women’s domestic labour increased.

Furthermore, gendered labour division can lead to an economic dependence on men. This creates an unequal power relationship, making women more vulnerable to gender-based violence, which is also an aspect that can be aggravated after natural disasters (Dagousset, 2020).

Lack of Economic Resources

The lack of economic resources is a factor that increases the vulnerability of all members of society, leading to higher mortality rates in natural disasters (Erman, 2021). Nonetheless, it can also be a factor that particularly puts women at more disadvantage in relation to men in natural disaster scenarios.

Studies demonstrate that 70 percent of the world’s poor are women, which is a fundamental factor that leads to a higher mortality rate of females in comparison to men during a disaster. Higher rates of poverty also lead women to have other limited resources, such as resilient housing, limited financial safety nets, and often less access to education. These inequalities and vulnerabilities are further enhanced in natural disasters, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that can become generational (Ragus, 2021).

For such reasons, in low and middle-income countries, the effects of hazardous events on women can be more severe (Ragus, 2021). It is demonstrated that, in societies where the socioeconomic status of women is low, natural disasters kill more women than men. One of the reasons for such difference relies on the fact that women, generally, have lower socioeconomic status, which leads to unequal opportunities, making them more vulnerable to natural disasters (ADB, 2014).

It is shown that, in societies where women and men enjoyed equal rights, there were no significant differences in the number of deaths based on sex in natural disasters. It is found that “the disproportional impact of natural disasters on women’s mortality is weaker in countries where women have a better socioeconomic status” (Erman, 2021, p. 20). On the other hand, “a meta-analysis of reports on disasters in 141 countries found that higher death rates for women were directly linked to their level of economic and social rights as compared to men” (ADB, 2021, p. 6).

Women's limited access to risk information and lack of agency for making decisions about a hazardous event can also interfere with their survival chances. For instance, in Bangladesh's 1991 cyclone, women were three to five times more likely than men to die, where women had limited knowledge about the location of shelters and relied on word of mouth for their information about the cyclone, while men quickly gathered information (Erman, 2021).

Economic factors are also relevant in post-disaster scenarios. Due to the unequal access of women to resources and assets, after a disaster, they face a risk of food insecurity and poverty. This is also facilitated by cultural aspects and gendered-labour division, as men can be in charge of collecting money, and women are likely to first provide for their families, neglecting their own needs (Dagousset, 2020).

1.2. Violence Against Women and Girls in the Aftermath of Disasters

Violence against women, or gender-based violence, is defined by the CEDAW Committee as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (CEDAW, 1992). Violence against women can affect women of all ages and it takes many forms, including sexual violence, such as rape (marital rape included), forced sterilisation, forced nudity, forced abortions, sexual harassment, incest, forced marriage, and forced genital mutilation (CEDAW, 1992; Dagousset, 2019).

Structural discrimination and patriarchal ideologies are the root causes of gender-based violence. Stereotyped gender norms, as well as traditional attitudes that limit women's role in societies and families are the fuels that contribute to harmful practices against women (Dagousset, 2019).

CEDAW Committee recognizes the right to live free from gender-based violence against women and girls. In its General Recommendation No. 35, the Committee states that gender-based violence against women is one of the main social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women compared to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated (CEDAW, 2017). The effects of violence against women result in crucial human rights violations; impacting women's rights to life and health, their ability to participate fully in society, their enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as their physical and psychological health (Dagousset, 2019).

Women and girls are at greater risk of violence in times of crisis. Many studies show that disaster situations and environmental degradation are factors that exacerbate gender-based violence against women and girls, and women are at heightened risk of rape, sexual exploitation, domestic violence and sexual harassment in post-disaster situations (Dagousset, 2019). This increased risk of gender-based violence during and after disasters is linked to pre-existing gender dynamics and patterns in society as mentioned above, since a disaster is not isolated from the social and cultural factors that underpin gender inequality and gender violence in the broader sense (Ahmad, 2018). Risk factors for gender-based violence in post-disaster situations include increased life stressors, failure of law enforcement, exposure to high-risk environments,

lack of safe and adequate housing, lack of privacy and exacerbation of existing gender inequalities.

The disaster may have left homes destroyed or severely damaged, which may compel individuals to resort to living situations that are not ideal or safe that might become their temporary shelter for prolonged periods of time after a disaster (Klein, 2008). For example, after the initial evacuation to shelters in the nearby states, Hurricane Katrina survivors whose homes have been destroyed were forced to share their homes with living companions like extended family members who posed a risk for the perpetration of sexual violence. Consequently, almost a third of reported incidents of sexual assault in the context of Hurricane Katrina occurred at evacuation shelters (Klein, 2008).

In evacuation centres and temporary shelters, women and girls are exposed to higher risks, as gender-based violence perpetrated by family members or others tends to increase or becomes more evident in these unsafe and privacy-lacking housing arrangements, due to social strains that aggravate stress levels (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). These shelters are often overcrowded, chaotic, unsafe and may lack adequate lighting. The absence of locking doors for bathrooms or private areas and gender-segregated facilities for sleeping, dressing or other activities may also contribute to the risk of violence. In Fiji, after the two cyclone disasters in 2012, women in relief centres were redundant to engage in sexual activity with their partners due to the lack of privacy. This resulted in some cases of sexual violence and forced sexual intercourse (UN Women Fiji, 2014).

When there is food scarcity and a lack of relief items in a post-disaster environment, women and girls are often exposed to sexual violence and exploitation as they attempt to access food and other basic needs, because of the absence of social protection services and law enforcement (CEDAW, 2018). Women and girls may be forced to engage in transactional or survival sex in exchange for access to food, shelter or other basic necessities (UN Women Fiji, 2014).

In many areas of the world, women are dependent on natural resources and agriculture for their and their families' livelihoods and nutrition. However, due to unequal gender dynamics in society and discriminatory norms, women lack control and ownership over the land and resources that they are dependent on. This, in turn, makes them less able to respond to and recover from disasters, also leading them to become vulnerable to gender based violence in their households and communities due to the negative stress-inducing impacts of the disaster (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020).

Conflicts triggered or heightened by resource scarcity brought upon as a result of disasters strengthen conditions for gender-based violence to thrive (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). In some cases, increased poverty following a disaster may also lead to early forced marriage in hopes of benefitting from dowry practices in some cultures (Dagousset, 2019; CEDAW, 2018). Practices of sexual trafficking and forced prostitution are also observed to be increasing after disasters, as human traffickers take advantage of the insecurity of vulnerable groups following a disaster and steer women and children

into sexual exploitation (Castane, 2020). Following a flood disaster in Fiji, it was reported that children were kept home from school to earn money at night through sex work (UN Women Fiji, 2014).

Where there is an increase in sexual violence but the accessibility to law enforcement and availability of authorities is low because the state's priorities lie elsewhere in the aftermath of a disaster, the reporting of gender-based violence considerably decreases. Law enforcement and other services don't function in their normal capacities as they are occupied with conducting search and rescue operations, and victims may not know how or where to seek services because of the chaos created by the disaster (Klein, 2008). The impunity that arises as a result, further increases the continued risk of sexual violence.

In conclusion, it is observed that in times of heightened stress, lawlessness, and homelessness associated with post-disaster environments, it becomes inevitable that women face an increased threat of gender-based violence.

1.3. Cultural Factors

Social and cultural norms dictate what constitutes acceptable behaviour for women in societies. These norms often result in consequences that restrict a woman's ability to look after herself in an emergency situation such as a natural disaster (Galvankova et al., 2018). Consequently, gendered cultural and social norms cause women to be affected worse than men from natural disasters, and cultural factors are one of the reasons why natural disasters kill more women than men.

In some cultures, women are expected to dress in a certain way, and their garments often cover most of their body and inhibit their movements. These limiting garments make it difficult for women to move swiftly and seek safety in case of an emergency (Dagousset, 2019). During the natural disasters that happened in Bangladesh, women suffered mostly because of their traditional dress, the *saree*, which limits their ability to move (Alam & Rahman, 2014).

Furthermore, in some cultures, it may be frowned upon for women to run, swim, climb trees, etc., and they may be less likely to be taught these skills or ever get the chance to practise them. During a tsunami in Sri Lanka, it was reported that men easily swam away or climbed trees to escape from the thrush of waters, whereas women were unable to do so, which resulted in the higher rate of mortality in women compared to men (Alam & Rahman, 2014). Additionally, women and girls may lack physical strength due to persistent nutritional inadequacies (Dagousset, 2019).

Due to patriarchal social norms that place a disproportionate amount of duty on women to care for their families, they remain behind during disasters to care for their children and elderly relatives (Dagousset, 2019). Rescue operations may also prioritise saving men over women in societies where male roles and status are valued more than those of women (Dagousset, 2019). For instance, after a tsunami that

struck India's Tamil Nadu state, elderly women were left out of some relief supplies with excuses like they needed less food to survive, while most rations were given to men (Alam & Rahman, 2014).

Women are often excluded from decision-making on disaster preparedness, and information on early warning systems is often shared in ways that are inaccessible to women (Galvankova et al., 2018). This is mainly because women in many countries culturally do not participate in decision making processes, regardless of whether it directly affects them or not, due to gendered social norms. Furthermore, the systems in place are inaccessible to women because women mostly remain at home conducting household activities and taking care of their families, and are not as present and active in social life outside as men.

To conclude, gendered social norms and cultural practices are important indicators as to why women and girls are affected worse than men during and after natural disasters.

Case Studies of Countries Regarding Women's Rights in Natural Disasters

The impacts of these factors on women during natural disasters are not limited to a specific region or continent but are found in many cases across the globe. The present section aims at identifying and explaining the main examples of natural disasters in different regions of the world. In analyzing these cases, the report will concretely identify the impacts caused on women, as well as some differences found in the distinct regions.

1.4. North America: Hurricane Katrina

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina crashed into the United States Gulf Coast, generating one of the biggest episodes of internal displacement in the country's history, with over a million people being immediately forced from their homes and communities (Kromm & Sturgis, 2008).

Due to the more equal distribution of economic and social rights between men and women, in comparison to other counties, there was a negligible difference between female and male death rates after Hurricane Katrina (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, n.d.). Nonetheless, women and girls were still more gravely impacted by the disaster.

It is revealed that, in the post-Katrina scenario, immediately after the disaster and up to a year later, women faced higher rates of violence and sexual assault. This was a result of the displacement caused, and the fact that women of lower income faced difficulties in finding permanent housing (Bapat, 2012). Since many women were forced to live in shelters, "sexual assault rates in Mississippi rose from 4.6 per 100,000 per day when Hurricane Katrina first hit the state, to 16.3 per 100,000 per day a year later" (Bapat, 2012).

The hurricane also have affected women's economic status in New Orleans in the years that followed the natural disaster, particularly women's workforce participation and the gender gap in wages. It also intensified the disparities between groups of particularly vulnerable women. In this context, after the disaster, the median earnings of Black and Hispanic women fell. In addition, the barriers to women's employment in New Orleans were intensified, including a lack of schools, childcare facilities, housing, and public transportation (Bapat, 2012).

It is identified that, through the Head Start program, pregnant women and their families received 90 million USD in total to cover the costs of replacing or repairing facilities that were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, when not covered by insurance or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In addition, the funds covered the costs of serving approximately 4,800 evacuee children from January 2006 until the end of the school year (Government of the United States of America, 2006).

1.5. Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America, combined with the Caribbean, is considered the second-most disaster-prone region in the world, being vulnerable to natural hazards like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes due to its unique tectonic structure and weather patterns (Hennings, 2023). On January 12th, 2010, Haiti was faced with a disastrous earthquake, which resulted in an estimated 222,000 deaths, injured 300,000 people, and displaced between 1.3 and 1.6 million people (Human Rights Watch, 2011b). The consequences of the displacement further included hunger, unemployment, and lack of adequate access to clean water and sanitation (Human Rights Watch, 2011a).

Nonetheless, women and girls faced additional challenges, including “lack of access to family planning, prenatal and obstetric care; a need to engage in survival sex to buy food for themselves and their children; and sexual violence”. (Human Rights Watch, 2011a, p. 01) Women also possessed a higher vulnerability in Haiti due to their precarious status in society. Reports demonstrate that the phenomenon of discrimination against women is widespread and tolerated, based on stereotypical perceptions, which make women and girls vulnerable to a range of abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2011a).

An epidemic of sexual violence broke out in the internally displaced camps after the disaster, due to factors such as “lack of adequate lighting, lack of private bathing facilities, lack of tents, lack of police presence, and exclusion of women’s grassroots organizations’ participation in the coordination efforts to address and prevent SGBV”. (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018, p. 11) The issue of sexual violence in camps even included SEA by humanitarian workers (UNPF, 2011).

It is identified that several gender-responsive measures could have been taken to prevent this outbreak, including

[P]roviding solar lanterns to women in IDP camps and street lighting in recovering neighborhoods, adequate patrolling in camps, more females in the police patrols, mechanisms to report violence, and meaningful participation of women’s organizations in planning and decision-making bodies (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018, p. 11).

As reported by Human Rights Watch, over one year after the disaster, women and girls were still facing gaps in access to available healthcare services necessary to stop preventable maternal and infant deaths. Additionally, 300,000 women and girls were at the time living in camps for displaced persons (Human Rights Watch, 2011b).

Recovery efforts have not adequately addressed women’s and girls’ needs, particularly their rights to health and security. Although aid agencies had worked to provide care, many women had not benefited, due to factors such as lack of information, poor transportation infrastructure, and unaffordable charges on services not covered by free care, jeopardising their basic rights to health and security (Human Rights Watch, 2011b).

On August 14th, 2021, a second earthquake, of magnitude 7.2, struck the south of Haiti, leading to about 2,248 deaths, 12,763 people injured, and 329 missing. The disaster was also exacerbated due to a political crisis occurring in the country, and the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN Women and CARE, 2021). The earthquake led to devastating impacts in Haiti. It destroyed and damaged hospitals, health centres, schools, drinking water systems, agriculture, livestock farming, and other essential infrastructure (UN Women – Americas and the Caribbean, 2022).

The earthquake in 2021 also caused particularly grave impacts on women and girls. In summary, it was identified that there was an increase in gender-based violence, to which women and girls, particularly those with disabilities, are disproportionately at risk (Humanity & Inclusion, n.d.). Furthermore, it was reported that 18 percent of women and 12 percent of the men interviewed were without shelter, which also increases the sense of insecurity by both women and men (UN Women and CARE, 2021).

1.6. Asia

The Asia and Pacific region represents the world's most disaster-prone area (ADB, 2014). Therefore, several examples of natural disasters in the region are identified, as well as their disproportionate impacts on women and some measures taken in this regard. On April 25th, 2015, an earthquake, also referred to as the Gorkha earthquake, struck near the city of Kathmandu in central Nepal. It killed about 9,000 people, injured many thousands, and resulted in the damaging or destruction of more than 600,000 structures in Kathmandu and other nearby towns (Rafferty, 2023).

As reported by UN Women, 55 percent of deaths caused by the earthquake corresponded to women. Some of the reasons pointed out for this higher ratio include the fact that a higher number of women were present during the earthquake, and many women delayed their escape to rescue children, older family members, and valuables (UN Women, 2019).

Since 73 percent of women in Nepal engaged in the agricultural sector, women in this field were deeply affected, losing approximately 15 billion NPR, while men lost 10 billion NPR in agricultural damage and loss. In addition, it was reported that displaced women were on average less able to recover from the losses, due to factors including lower access to savings and lower levels of education (UN Women, 2019).

Furthermore, there were a large number of reports of sexual exploitation and abuse, harassment, and trafficking in the post-disaster scenario. It was reported that only 11 percent of the camps had designated safe/social spaces for women, and 73 percent lacked gender-sensitive or separate toilets and washing facilities (UN Women, 2019).

In the immediate aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, UN Women established five multipurpose women's centres, which were able to aid 42,700 affected women. They received a wide range of services, "including

psychosocial counseling and trauma assistance, legal referrals for survivors of violence, and information and access to livelihood opportunities” (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018, p. 12).

Another relevant example in the region refers to the two typhoons, Ondoy and Pepeng, that struck the Philippines in late September and early October 2009, resulting in 956 deaths, over 700 injured, and 84 persons missing (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, n.d.). This case is particularly relevant since, in the aftermath of the hazard, the government of the Philippines passed two laws establishing a legal basis for gender mainstreaming in climate change and disaster risk management policy. Firstly, the 2009 Climate Change Act implicitly recognised women as a vulnerable group, mandating a gender-responsive and calling for the establishment of a gender-responsive Framework Strategy and Program on Climate Change (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018).

The 2010 Philippines Disaster Reduction and Management Act is seen as an example of a good gender-sensitive law, providing for gender equality principles, for a specific representation of women’s agencies in its institutions, and reassures the need to investigate the difference of needs between women and men (ADB, 2021). Furthermore, it explicitly established an obligation towards the government to “ensure that disaster risk reduction and climate change measures are gender responsive”, as well as required the inclusion of the Gender Development Office on the Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Committees (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018, p. 15).

Middle East: Earthquake in Türkiye & Syria

On February 6th, 2023, two earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.5 hit Türkiye, affecting eleven provinces in the the Southeast region of the country, as well as Northern Syria. The population of the affected area was around 14 million, and with the number of lives lost, injured and homes destroyed, it has proved to be one of the deadliest natural disasters of this century worldwide (UN Women, 2023).

Prior to the earthquakes, women and girls already lived in precarious conditions in the impacted areas (Thakkar, 2023). The affected region in Türkiye has always been a more low-income and under-developed part of the country, with many people depending on the land and agricultural practices for their livelihood, and where strict traditional cultural norms govern social life. The region has the lowest female employment rate in Türkiye, which means that women are highly involved in unpaid familial care and domestic work (UN Women, 2023). Additionally, the rate of early marriages is considerably above the national average in the affected region, with a relatively lower rate of domestic violence reports and a higher level of acceptance in case of violence (UN Women, 2023).

In Syria, people were already struggling to deal with issues brought on by 12 years of war, with the Southeastern region in Türkiye having become home to a large number of refugees who were internally displaced. As Türkiye hosts the largest refugee population in the world, around 1.74 million Syrians under Temporary Protection live in the eleven provinces

impacted by the earthquakes, half of which are women and girls (UN Women, 2023).

As pre-existing structural gender inequalities often make women more vulnerable in times of disaster, the effects of the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria on women and girls have only exacerbated the uncertainty and unfavourable living conditions that many were already experiencing, driving more women and girls into hardship and poverty (Thakkar, 2023).

In the aftermath of the earthquakes, assessments carried out by UN Women and other human rights groups revealed that women and girls have been impacted severely (UN Women, 2023). In particular, women and girls faced challenges regarding access to basic needs and essential services, vital relief equipment, appropriate shelter, hygiene, sanitation and healthcare; with many women and girls also facing risks of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence (UN Women, 2023; Norris, 2023).

Women and girls' domestic work and familial care responsibilities increased considerably after the earthquake, with many children and elderly people's care demands escalating in the face of injuries and psychological strains caused by the disaster (UN Women, 2023). Women worked continuously in temporary shelters trying to provide care and domestic needs for their families, as is required by gendered social norms, in worse conditions than normal with limitations in equipment and facilities needed to perform household tasks (Shafak, 2023).

With the earthquake overwhelming hospitals and destroying infrastructure, a lack of access to proper medical care and clean water had specific health impacts on women in vulnerable situations, with reports of multiple incidents where women had to give birth under the rubble of buildings or in the unsanitary conditions of the temporary shelters (Norris, 2023).

Moreover, social taboos around women's menstruation made it particularly difficult for women and girls to ask for sanitary pads and other period products, further increasing their struggle (Shafak, 2023; Norris, 2023). In response to this, UN Women urged for more female aid workers and frontline responders on the field through providing more funding to women's organisations active in the earthquake zone (UN Women, 2023).

The displacement following the earthquake resulted in overcrowded, unhygienic, and unsafe living conditions in the temporary shelters. As a result, civil society organisations reporting an increase in gender-based and sexual violence in these environments (UN Women, 2023).

Regarding women and girls' access to education in the post-disaster environment, active organisations in the field reported that women and girls living in temporary shelters and tents were unable to continue accessing education, which increased the risk of child early forced marriages (UN Women, 2023). Moreover, the government's decision to transition to online education in the earthquake affected area and to turn student dormitories into shelters for earthquake survivors increased the possibility of girls' exposure to violence in the family home, not to mention the difficulties of accessing digital tools to

participate in online education (UN Women, 2023). Extensive periods of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the effects of the earthquake have had concerning impacts on women and girls' education in the earthquake zone (UN Women, 2023). This is particularly concerning as the government's priorities should lie foremost with the uninterrupted continuation of education, since education is key to achieving gender equality in the labour market and in society in general.

Many local and national civil society organisations and NGOs stepped up to aid women and girls affected from the earthquake. However, they faced numerous challenges in delivering their humanitarian aid, from regulatory and bureaucratic difficulties to operational hindrances. According to UN Women's findings, civil society organisations reported that there were limitations to equal participation, decision-making, and cooperation for women, which negatively impacted their ability to deliver effective humanitarian aid.

Women and their organisations felt that they were not meaningfully included in policy making, consultations, and cooperation initiatives, and their perspectives and experiences and insights were not reflected in key strategic processes and decisions (UN Women, 2023). Moreover, they experienced difficulties in cooperating and communicating with stakeholders to support women and girls, due to pre-existing inequalities regarding women's participation in decision-making processes (UN Women, 2023).

Civil society organisations also expressed resentment about the lengthy process to receive official authorisation to provide psychosocial support, which was much needed. Due to the bureaucratic challenges such as obtaining a legal permit to operate in the earthquake zone, response has been delayed.

Lastly, due to strict legal and financial regulations on aid and donations to civil society organisations, obtaining the necessary resources to deliver humanitarian aid has been financially challenging for most organisations (UN Women, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the issues discussed in this report demonstrate clearly, although natural disasters affect societies as a whole and cause grave human rights violations, most frequently, it is women and girls who are impacted more severely.

There are several reasons for this; in many contexts, entrenched gender inequalities restrict women and girls' ability to exercise control over decisions that govern their lives. Their access to resources such as food, water, land, labour, social protection and health care is limited considerably because of this, which becomes more crucial in times of crisis. As a result of unequal gender norms, women and girls are more likely to be subject to disaster-related risks and losses relating to their livelihoods, as well as being less able to adapt to changes resulting from disaster situations (CEDAW, 2018).

The main factors making disaster-induced risks more crucial for women and exacerbating their human rights violations in times of crisis, as discussed above, are women's gender-specific health and hygiene requirements, gendered labour division, women's lack of access to economic resources, increased risk of violence against women and girls in the aftermath of disasters, and gendered cultural norms that feed into the entrenched inequality between men and women. These factors considerably exacerbate existing inequalities for women and girls pre, during and post-disasters, causing them to be impacted more severely from these crisis situations than men.

Even though it is evident that women constitute a vulnerable group that is more at risk of human rights violations in times of natural disasters, it is important to note that this classification as a "vulnerable group" should not result in the misconception of rendering women passive and destitute to protection from disaster effects. This is a derogatory gender stereotype that ignores the significant contributions made by women in disaster risk reduction efforts and post-disaster management. Well-designed disaster risk reduction initiatives that allow for the full and effective participation of women can significantly reduce the likelihood of disasters occurring (CEDAW, 2018). In terms of disaster management, it is crucial to prevent women's capacity and skills getting overlooked due to existing gender inequalities.

As such, policies that consider gender dynamics and promote gender inclusivity at the decision-making level will decrease disaster impacts for women more efficiently (Erman, 2021). In this sense, it has been observed that including women in disaster risk reduction programmes and post-disaster management is very important. UN Women studies conducted with civil society organisations show that local women-led organisations and community groups with women leadership are key in disaster areas to mobilise change and identify solutions to respond to crises (UN Women, 2023).

To ensure this inclusion, a portion of the financing can be directed to community centres and similar institutions used mostly by women to ensure that emergency and reconstruction resources support inclusive recovery. Risk of gender-based violence can also be decreased if there are more women working in civic protection, humanitarian aid, and government disaster response. When women are active in these programs, they typically better understand the needs of women and children and, in some situations, can more easily reach other women (Erman, 2021).

Women can contribute significantly at multiple levels to the resilience to disaster risk reduction and climate change. The traditional knowledge that women possess in agricultural regions of the world that are typically more prone to natural disasters is especially significant at the local level. These women,

who work extensively with the land to provide for their families due to gendered labour division, are in a unique position to observe environmental changes and adapt the skills necessary to cope with disaster effects, such as crop selection, planting, and harvesting practices, as well as their use of land conservation methods and water resource management strategies, to meet the challenges they face after natural disasters (CEDAW, 2018). It is only the logical approach to include these women in disaster risk reduction efforts and make use of their knowledge and experience, to mitigate the effects of disasters for all.

In terms of disaster preparedness, it is essential to ensure that early warning systems are gender-responsive. Women and men have different roles according to culture and social status that affect their ability to properly prepare for, prevent and respond to disasters. To ensure that a gendered approach is taken in disaster preparedness, involving women and men equally in planning, monitoring, response activities and decision-making processes, while addressing the different roles and needs of men and women in this process is key (Galvankova et al., 2018).

To address the major challenges women face in post-disaster environments such as the increase in the risk of gender-based violence in the emergency shelters and recovery centres, these temporary shelter arrangements should be designed according to cultural norms and especially with women's safety in mind to prevent women from being exposed to additional risks of violence.

For the long-term approach, it is of crucial importance to work towards weakening existing gender roles in cultures that highlight inequalities between men and women, and improving women's status in society. Gender inclusivity and incentivising women to participate in disaster planning and management programs is one way to tackle entrenched gender inequalities and mitigate the effects of natural disasters on women's well-being and livelihood.

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