

What is gender justice in disasters?

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To think constructively about gender in disasters, we need some clarity about gender. The most common ideas are that gender is simply a biological dichotomy between male and female; or that gender is an individual and very personal identity.

Biology and identity are certainly aspects of gender, but not the whole story. They are bound up with divisions and relationships in society as a whole. Gender is, above all, relational. It is a social structure and a major pattern in human social life.

It is helpful to recognise 4 major dimensions in gender relations. First, a pattern in economic life. Second, a pattern of power and authority. Third, a powerful presence in emotional lives. Finally, a cultural dimension, concerning attitudes, language and communication.

It's very important to recognise that gender doesn't just mean 'women'. Men and masculinities are as deeply involved in gender relations as women and femininities are. There are multiple forms of masculinity and multiple forms of femininity. There are some people who don't fall into the categories of men or women at all and there are other people whose lives move between different gender positions. This is complex territory. It's not surprising that disasters, and responses to disasters, are connected with gender relations in multiple ways.

Before an event, someone's gender is likely to shape their vulnerability and exposure. When the terrible Rana Plaza factory collapse occurred in Bangladesh, most of the people crushed to death were working-class women. It's not hard to see why. A familiar gender division of labour in the global economy means that most low-paid workers in the clothing industry were (and are) women. Gender may also shape the way an event produces toxic effects. When COVID-19 triggered lockdowns, more women in marriages and partnerships were exposed to longer periods of domestic violence.

Responses to disasters are also gendered. It's a familiar fact that many of the people responding to emergencies are in strongly masculinised occupations, such as fire and forestry services, police, army and navy. In such occupational cultures, gay men as well as women can be marginalised on the basis of social stereotypes. Even the language used about disaster response is gendered. The

mainstream media constantly refer to firefighting and often use military metaphors: 'fronts', 'tactics', 'battle'. Yet the same activities could well be called 'care' (as in landcare). In our culture, 'fighting' is generally connected with a dominating form of masculinity, while 'care' is coded as feminine.

Gender relations also shape the downstream recovery from disasters. Communities in recovery have tough decisions to make; who is going to make them? Historically, mayors and councillors, local landowners and business owners have been men. This is changing in some regions, but not all. At elite levels, where the policies of governments and big corporations (including banking and insurance) are set, power is overwhelmingly in the hands of men. About 95% of the CEOs of major transnational corporations are men.¹ Senior management positions in business and politics have a strongly masculinised culture; regrettably, highly visible in the Australian Parliament during 2021.

Disaster prevention work is also gendered. When information is provided, who receives it? In many parts of the world, the proportion of women who are literate is below the rate for men, and in poorer communities it can be far below. This is a product of under-investment in education of girls and, while this is changing, large gaps still exist. Gender divisions of labour and gender inequalities of power also operate in prevention. Think of food security, family nutrition and the interplay of economics and nature in forestry, fisheries and mining.

Gender justice in disaster management, then, is a broad-spectrum and highly practical question. Gender justice is not about feel-good declarations. It is about how we do gender relations in all the arenas of practical life. It is a matter of conducting our lives and our work in ways marked by equality, inclusiveness, mutual respect and peace.

1. 'The number of women running Global 500 businesses soars to an all-time high', *Fortune*, 2 August 2021. At: <https://fortune.com/2021/08/02/female-ceos-global-500-fortune-500-cvs-karen-lynch-ping-an-jessica-tan/> [1 December 2021].