



Working Paper

# Disasters and violence against women and girls

## Can disasters shake social norms and power relations?

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## Key messages

- Despite the ‘window of opportunity’ created by disasters to change societal structures, the current literature suggests that people’s traditional roles are re-emphasised and gender inequalities often worsen after an emergency.
- Studies document the harmful impacts of disasters on social relations across every contexts, however, it is the combination of disaster impacts and the failure of protective systems (often unavailable in the first place) which aggravate gender inequalities such as violence against women and girls.
- It is widely recognised that data on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is under-reported, although research shows that violence increases after a disaster. Pre- and post-disaster vulnerability and capacity assessments should systematically consider the many dimensions of violence - not just sexual and physical violence, but verbal and emotional abuse, intimate-partner violence, trafficking, child marriage and female genital mutilation, for emergency responses to really support those most affected.
- More qualitative, comparative and longitudinal research is needed to document how households and communities’ adaptive risk strategies have the potential to transform gender relations and social norms, in which contexts and under which circumstances.
- Disaster-induced displacement and migration are likely to impact those left behind in terms of their roles, network support and opportunities. The implications of migration for potential shifts in power structures in places of origin and the overall resilience of households and communities needs further attention.

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# Introduction

The destruction and loss caused by disasters<sup>1</sup> affect multiple aspects of people's well-being, both physically and socially. Effects are manifested in health and living conditions, as well as in interactions within the family and wider community. Looking at the impacts of disasters on social relations of affected communities is vital, not only in order to uncover patterns of vulnerability (i.e. why and how people are affected by disasters) but also to better understand their capacities (i.e. how people cope with and recover from shocks and stresses) and ultimately their resilience.

Understanding disasters through a social relations lens helps make visible the social structure of communities, organisations, households, and intimate relationships within which disastrous events unfold (Enarson, 1999). Placing the attention on gender relations in particular is a critical way to better comprehend power dynamics (see Agarwal, 1997 for a discussion on factors that affect bargaining power) and how these might be challenged or exacerbated during and after a crisis. This is important as it aids more effective targeting of entry points for humanitarian assistance and in improving the relevance of projects in order to enhance communities' resilience.

The international aid delivery system often fails to recognise the conflicts of interest existing in affected communities' social structures (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989; Berke et al., 2005). In times of crisis, social norms (i.e. the informal and formal laws, beliefs and practices that help to determine collective understanding of what are acceptable attitudes and behaviours- Harper et al.,

2014) are played out within a new space, opening up the possibility for producing alternative social interactions. These can lead to opportunities for women and men to take on new responsibilities. Existing socioeconomic and gender-based inequalities, discriminatory gendered norms, power abuse and the resulting pervasive violence against women and girls (VAWG), however, are also able to occupy this space, therefore increasing the potential for worsening conditions in the aftermath of disasters and leaving those traditionally marginalised even more vulnerable to subsequent risks.

From the current available literature on disasters and on gender and resilience, we know that disasters affect social relations. How shocks and stresses lead to changes in gendered norms and power relations and whether these changes tend to be to the detriment or the benefit of marginalised groups is still uncertain, however. Moreover, to what extent these changes are transient or may have the potential to challenge durably existing inequalities is unclear. The aim of this paper is to compile evidence from academic studies and Non-Governmental Organisations' (NGOs) documentation about the impacts of disasters on power relations and gendered norms and to discuss how these types of changes affect people's resilience. The objective is to highlight knowledge gaps to better understand why and how resilience programming can integrate social dimensions of vulnerability and foster more equal power relations.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, disasters are defined as an event, triggered by natural, technological hazards or conflicts, whose impacts overwhelm local capacity and necessitate external assistance (source: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters – CRED. [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be)). Both rapid-onset events (e.g. earthquake, cyclone) and slow-onset disasters (drought, protracted conflicts) are considered and also referred to as emergencies.

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# Research questions and methodology

Current discussions between researchers and practitioners on resilience programming<sup>2</sup> highlight the crucial need to gather more evidence on the impacts of disasters on social norms and power relations in affected communities. If resilience building is to be transformative, it must transform unequal power relations that contribute to maintain vulnerability (Reyes et al., 2013). If organisations aim to support transformation (i.e. accompany marginalised groups to empower themselves rather than impose a transformative agenda), they need to understand better the risks and opportunities associated with responding to a crisis to inform their work.

Development practitioners attempting to promote gender equality as part of efforts to enhance community resilience stress the difficulties in addressing social norms (see Le Masson, 2016). These are deeply entrenched in social structures, upheld by members of society in positions of power and manifest in multiple ways, including, parental preference for boys, unequal access to education and health, child marriage, VAWG and inheritance practices that deepen women's poverty (Harper et al, 2014). Due to power dynamics and potential threats to power, any attempt at promoting the empowerment of those traditionally marginalised through resilience building may face backlash. The resistance to changing norms can often entrench norms further, which is why resilient capacities should be built through a combination and sequence of multi-stakeholders' processes, including

non-traditional, both from power holders and from marginalised groups (Jeans et al., 2016).

Because they disturb the 'everyday normal', disastrous events open windows of opportunities to change dominant ways of thinking and acting (Birkmann et al., 2010). In disaster literature, however, little is known about the potential generated by crises in addressing issues of power and inequalities in affected communities. Understanding the pre-existing gender norms and power relations and how crises provides opportunities for change is fundamental in being able to address inequalities, both as agencies supporting communities and within communities themselves.

This paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the impacts of disasters on gender relations, equality and gendered norms?
2. Why should transformative resilience tackle unequal gendered norms?
3. What do these findings mean for resilience programming?

The analysis draws on a desk-based review of both academic and grey literatures on disasters, social vulnerability and gender-based violence. It also integrates data from development and humanitarian projects as well as accounts from practitioners involved in resilience programming.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was initiated following a roundtable organised by CARE International in July 2016 in London, to discuss the linkages between gender equality and resilience, and how resilience programming can effectively address social norms.

# What are the impacts of disasters on gender relations, equality and social norms?



Tents provided by the Government of Japan serves as temporary shelter for families in Barangay Candahug, Palp, Leyte, Philippines, following Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)  
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During or immediately after the occurrence of extreme natural phenomena or conflicts, those at risk generally take action to protect themselves, their families and their neighbours (Kreps, 1984). In many cases, the occurrence of extreme events has been a catalyst to strengthen community bonds and solidarity (Anderson and Woodrow, 1998; Oliver-Smith, 1999) with some studies exploring the effectiveness of social capital (i.e. the function of trust, social norms, participation, and networks) for disaster recovery (Nagakawa and Shaw, 2004). At the same time, disasters have been seen to aggravate pre-existing inequalities by further marginalising already disadvantaged groups. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the ratio of women's to men's earnings in New Orleans declined from 81.6% prior to the disaster to 61.8% in 2006 and intimate-partner violence against women increased (Willinger, 2008). Meanwhile, women inhabiting New Orleans were found to be 2.7 times more likely than men to have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Ibid). Overall, however, post-disaster research lacks insights into social

processes that occur after a crisis and how they reinforce or challenge power structures.

## A window of opportunity?

A number of organisational, institutional and political actions occur in the aftermath of a disaster which are opportunities to challenge power structures, in particular the generation of knowledge. New information resulting from the disaster experience and recovery process informs various stakeholders about the nature of risks and the causes of vulnerability. This information can highlight weaknesses in development policies, expose corruption, demonstrate what key services are lacking for the most marginalised society's members, and reveal weak institutional structures that maintain inequalities (Christoplos, 2006).

Moreover, the influx of humanitarian assistance means that funding becomes available to help the recovery process and target the needs of the most vulnerable, from

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providing cash transfers to implementing protection programmes. This is especially the case if disasters have destroyed much of the infrastructure and services that were initially improperly designed, creating a ‘blank slate’ for ‘building back better’ (Christoplos, 2006). This rebuilding provides a ‘moment of opportunity for women’ and can help them “challenge prevailing gender norms, e.g. using relief funds to leave an abusive relationship, developing new job skills through reconstruction work, and gaining self-confidence and leadership skills through collective action to meet women’s needs and interests” (Enarson, 2006: 5). Moreover, disaster recovery may open up new networks of support or pathways to previously unattainable opportunities (Bradshaw and Fordham, 2013) although more contextual evidence is needed.

However, studies that provide empirical evidence on positive and long-lasting shifts of power (i.e. where power dynamics change to better recognise and support the need and voice of marginalised people) are scarce. These kinds of changes are often only uncovered through in-depth, qualitative and longitudinal research and observations from development practitioners interacting with communities they work with on a daily basis. The scarcity of information on positive changes following a disaster might also be due to the fact that organisations who provide humanitarian assistance collect data solely through vulnerability assessments which do not integrate gender and power analyses. The objective consists in reporting what has been destroyed and lost in order to target the needs of those affected. When agencies report an improvement in the living conditions of and relations between community members, this is often to report how their programmes have supported change, rather than an analysis of changed power dynamics. The more endogenous adaptive strategies developed by community members without external assistance receive far less attention. However, recent methodologies of assessments have been developed to overcome some of these shortcomings (see Morchain and Kelsey, 2016 and Sterrett, 2016).

## Shift in identities and roles?

The disruption caused by disasters or conflicts can destabilise processes of reproduction of gender roles and routines (Enarson, 1998). In times of emergency, survival-linked tasks may facilitate opportunities for women and men to challenge and transgress traditional gender roles and norms (ibid). However, the nature and scale of disasters may influence the potential for such opportunities and more research is needed to understand if sudden-onset events, for instance, are more likely to challenge the gender division of labour and inequalities given the abruptness of impacts they can generate. In the case of slow onset disasters, such as droughts in Kenya, changes in the roles of men and women in agriculture have been observed in CARE programmes with men starting to take

on agricultural roles traditionally perceived to be women’s responsibilities such as weeding, harvesting and processing agricultural products (Otzelberger, 2016), or collecting water and fuel despite this being originally perceived as being in the domain of women and girls (Webb, 2016). However, to what extent changes in gender roles actually tackle discriminatory gendered norms, or do not lead to backlash, is under-documented. One study in Tanzania, reveals that if men increasingly take on the role of fetching water, particularly during drought periods, they link this task to the cash economy by selling water to businesses and households (Van Aelst, 2016). Therefore, the perceived changes in division of labour and ‘productive’ use of water do not structurally transform gendered norms and the way women’s traditional tasks are (not) valued. Gender analyses typically ask whether men taking on women’s traditional roles actually benefit women’s conditions and positions; whether it reduces their workload and improves their control over resources and their power in decision-making processes, which is why they are so important for NGOs’ work (see Morchain et al, 2015).

Such analyses allow for a better understanding of inequalities in gender roles that actually remain or even worsen after a disaster. For instance, following the East Japan disaster of 2010, women in the evacuation centres were required to prepare meals for which they received no compensation. Male evacuees, on the other hand, were not expected to contribute to this task, and had the option of collecting and removing rubbish, for which they received compensation (Saito, 2012). In Haiti, women living in camps after the earthquake in 2010 coped with male-dominated committees controlling aid distribution, which often forced them to negotiate through the use of sexual favours in order to meet basic needs and obtain access to supplies (Horton, 2012). These examples illustrate how crises such as natural hazard-related disasters and conflicts might actually exacerbate unequal gender relations (Fordham et al., 2006). The reliance on familial support after a crisis may also reinforce established power relations, which further remove agency and control from women in particular (Hoffman, 1998 cited in Bradshaw and Fordham, 2013). Despite the critical insights they provide, gender-sensitive assessments and the collection of sex, age, and disability-disaggregated data are not systematically conducted before and in the aftermath of a disaster (Morchain et al, 2015; IFRC 2016).

## Coping mechanisms that reinforce inequalities

Evidence and observations gathered by NGOs highlight that in times of emergencies, women and girls experience a re-emphasis of (i) their traditional and often lower household position or status and (ii) a worsening of their condition.

In several areas of Ethiopia, gender norms shape food distribution within households, dictating that men and

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children under the age of 3 eat first, followed by boys and girls, and finally women (CARE Ethiopia, 2016: 3). In times of food scarcity, coping mechanisms utilised by households to fulfil their nutrition needs may result in high health problems and malnutrition for women, causing their health status to decrease and therefore also their ability to work and access key resources required within the household itself.

Another negative coping strategy observed in CARE programming in Ethiopia is families taking children out of school in order to help with household labour in response to the reduction of livestock. Droughts typically result in high absenteeism of girls, who are asked to help with collecting water and caring for other family members or who are sent out to work as domestic maids. Boys' attendance is also affected as they are expected to look for pasture and water for livestock or seek livelihood opportunities away from home (CARE Ethiopia, 2016; Webb, 2016).

Directly linked to a drop in school attendance is the increase of child marriage following a disaster, with evidence from Bangladesh (Verma et al. 2013), India and Sri Lanka (UNFPA 2012) and Kenya (North, 2010). During times of drought in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, families marry off their daughters earlier than usual to reduce the size of the household and the number of people to feed and use the dowry provided by the groom's family as a source of cash (Otzelberger, 2014). While this coping mechanism might enhance the capacities of households, young women and girls who enter marriages are forced to abandon their education, face early pregnancy and associated health risks and generally suffer from a lower status within their new families, which are all detrimental outcomes for their resilience.

Marriage is a risk factor of intimate partner violence (WHO, 2013), yet the identity and status women attain through marriage also offer economic and social protections (Solotaroff and Prabha Pande, 2014) which can help following a disaster. In South Asia, women who are no longer married—that is, divorcees and widows, whose number is likely to increase in parallel to disasters' death toll—face different and sometimes unique forms of violence (from social stigma to widow burning) although this area is under-researched (ibid). In Ethiopia, pastoral and livestock-based communities may cope with crises by reducing herd sizes. Reduced herd sizes result in men being less able to support their wives, and so they may choose to divorce them as their own personal coping strategy (Webb, 2015). This leaves women without economic support and rights to land to sustain themselves.

In Uganda, a vulnerability assessment revealed the effects of men facing a 'masculinity crisis' linked to the loss of livelihoods: Mercy Corps notes that many men are unwilling to engage in agriculture, which they consider 'women's work'. Not having an alternative form of work leads to this crisis, causing rising levels of idleness which contribute to alcoholism and gender-based violence, impeding on household well-being (Opondo et al., 2016).

Such knowledge typically generated in development programming is either not documented or is reported in a way that is usually considered anecdotal by academics and donors. This undermines the understanding of disaster impacts on gender relations and how these relations shape the recovery and resilience process.

## Increased displacement and migration

Migration is a coping strategy for many people affected by disasters, although patterns of displacement depend on the nature of the hazard, the socio-economic characteristics of affected households and the gender divide (Millock, 2015). In Ethiopia, men's labour migration increases significantly after a drought while women's marriage-related mobility decreases following a (self-reported) drought (Gray and Mueller, 2012 quoted in Millock, 2015). This is corroborated by CARE practitioners who observed that men and boys in pastoral communities are forced to migrate to the neighbouring districts in search of pasture and water (CARE Ethiopia, 2016: 2). This has had negative effects, such as weakening traditional livelihood networks and conflicts with other communities due to competition for resources. Wives of migrant workers reported increased workloads and felt less support as a result of their husband's absence. They also face discrimination as a female-headed household (Webb, 2016). In contrast, mixed effects have been recorded in the Borana pastoral region of Ethiopia. In focus group discussions, some women reported benefitting from greater mobility and greater control over income due to new non-livestock livelihood activities, but their workloads also increased and the traditional support system weakened. They reported observing less solidarity between community members helping and caring for each other (Ridgewell et al., 2007).

The post-disaster 'flight of men' documented across many contexts (Enarson, 2000) means that other household members are forced to look for new opportunities to generate an income even though they are less mobile and less able to migrate outside the impacted area (CARE International, 2015). In the region of Amnibura, Ethiopia, pastoralist livelihoods adopted more sedentary patterns which led women to become involved in trading and selling goods. In turn, this influenced the way household assets were managed, with women gaining greater control over the household funds (Ritchie, 2015).

There is little information about the impact of migration on men and women post disaster, and even less on children and adolescents (Bradshaw and Fordham, 2013). What displacement means for women and girls left behind in terms of their roles and opportunities, but also implications for potential shifts in power structures, needs further attention.

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## Rise of gender-based violence and violence against women and girls

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is one of the most pronounced manifestations of gender inequalities, and has been reported to increase in the wake of disasters (see Enarson, 1999 for a review). Evidence of the occurrence of violence in emergencies, mostly generated by agencies involved in relief work and development projects, underscores that post-disaster sex and gender-based violence (SGBV) occurs in all countries and at all stages of development (Amnesty International, 2011; Parkinson, 2015; IFRC, 2016). In Japan, sexual and physical violence against women occurred in the aftermath of earthquakes in 1997 and 2010, affecting not only local women but also evacuees and volunteers working in the evacuation centres. However, social pressure impedes victims' capacities to report abuse and for any information to be adequately collected (Saito, 2012). In the United States, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the rape rate among women displaced to trailer parks was 53.6 times higher than the highest baseline rate for Mississippi in 2004; with intimate partner rape being 16 times higher than the US yearly rate (IFRC, 2007). In Uganda, a needs assessment conducted by Mercy Corps in Karamoja revealed that harmful practices, including domestic violence, child marriage, courtship rape and female genital mutilation/cutting, spike during droughts and prolonged dry spells (Opondo et al., 2016).

Studies show that women and girls, and even more so women with disabilities, LGBT community, ethnic minority women, or women of a low caste, are more likely to be targeted by violence than men, highlighting that people's social identities (i.e. their gender, age, sexual orientation, class or class status) influence their vulnerability to risks (WHO, 2013). Women's and girls' roles also influence the risk factor of violence. Scarcity of water in the Sahel force women and girls to walk longer distances to fetch water and fuel, increasing their exposure and risk of harassment and sexual assault (Skinner, 2011; Le Masson, 2016; Morris, 2015). In some emergencies where CARE has provided humanitarian assistance water is scarce, leading to long queues and potential conflict during the day. This is why sometimes girls, who are deemed responsible for fetching water, decide to get water at night, which increases their risk of being exposed to sexual assault (CARE Ethiopia, 2016). Moreover, in Papua New Guinea, the drought precipitated by El Niño led to increased security concerns for both men and women, with GBV reported by women, alongside child abuse and robbery (CAREa, 2015).

The use of alcohol or drugs, already a widespread health issue, has been found by some studies to constitute a coping mechanism to deal with stress as well as a risk factor contributing to increased VAWG. For example, in a post-Cyclone Nargis assessment in Myanmar, respondents mentioned that they noticed an increase in alcohol consumption and perceived an increase by 30% in domestic violence after the disaster (Women's

Protection Technical Working Group, 2010). Post-disaster, men are more likely to turn to gambling, alcoholism and perpetrating violence due to the threat to their masculinity through the undermining of their traditional role as protectors and providers (World Bank 2001; Skinner 2011). CARE's research in East Hararghe, Ethiopia, indicates that in difficult times, men can resent not having enough money to buy 'khat' (a traditional herbal stimulant that is a banned Class C drug in the UK), which can result in domestic fights.

## The failure of protective systems

Deaths caused by disasters and displacement increase the number of widows and orphans, result in the loss of support networks, and often shatter both formal and informal protection mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2011). VAWG increases in a humanitarian crisis, and studies have shown that means of protection against violence diminishes (IFRC, 2015; IASC, 2015; FAO, 2010; IFRC, 2011). Traditional, community or state based support services may be disrupted, less available and under-resourced, increasing difficulty in dealing with VAWG (IFRC, 2016), particularly when these issues are typically not considered the most important to address in the context of disasters and conflicts.

The lack of protection systems, whether disrupted by disasters or inexistent in the first place, further compounds the vulnerability to risk of violence during and after a crisis (IFRC, 2012). For example, the destruction of houses and resulting shortage of shelters can restrict women's ability to leave violent relationships (Enarson, 1999). Food and livelihood insecurities can also increase social tensions (FAO, 2010). The low social status and/or loss of income and social support of many women following a disaster make them a target of violence because perpetrators know such women are less likely to report abuse or seek assistance, especially if the legal and judicial system is not functioning (Amnesty International, 2009; CARE, 2014). Following the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) where rape and other sexual violence against women and girls were perpetrated on a mass scale, survivors had to cope with serious physical and psychological harm without adequate health care support or justice from the authorities. Victims not only suffered from the conflict and associated violence, but they also faced social stigma attached to rape. Many women were divorced by their husbands when it was found they had been raped (Amnesty International, 2009). In such contexts, the impact of a disaster emphasises gender-based inequalities and unbalanced power relations, whereby women suffer physically, lose their status or assets, or live in fear: all contributing to their vulnerability to risks and undermining their resilience. In post-conflict settings, Handrahan (2004) stresses the urgent need to better understand the dynamics

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of gender and ethnicity, if more 'secure' environments are the desired outcome.

The harmful combination of increased GBV and inadequate means of protection place Internally-Displaced Peoples (IDPs) under great pressure, due to often witnessing a disaster, surviving violence, and experiencing the trauma of displacement itself. In refugee and displacement camps, cramped living circumstances, poor lighting and lack of security at water and sanitation facilities and the dearth of channels in which to report violence, sexual exploitation and cases of early marriage leave women and girls at higher risk of abuse (IFRC, 2012; Asgary et al., 2013; CARE, 2014). In Haiti, in 2010, at least 242 cases of rape against women were recorded in relief camps during the first 150 days following the earthquake (Amnesty International, 2011). In Nimule town, South Sudan, which hosts 30,000 IDPs, CARE staff heard many stories of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and transactional sexual relations as a coping mechanism for girls to survive (CARE, 2014).

In Afghanistan, Majidi and Hennion (2014) found that 64% of women they surveyed, reported domestic violence during displacement, often as a result of increased stress experienced by husbands. Displaced women and girls faced a higher risk of forced prostitution and forced marriage; 27% of girls were forced to marry against their will, and widows were frequently forced to marry a relative of their late husband. Daughters were also targeted for low-cost marriage by outsiders taking advantage of IDPs. IDPs are therefore entrapped in situations of acute psychological or physical violence with very little information on ways to escape (Majidi and Hennion, 2014).

## **Blaming disasters for increased inequalities?**

Although the literature shows the harmful impacts of disasters on social relations, the worsening of gender inequalities such as VAWG may increase as a result (or lack) of humanitarian response rather than as a direct

consequence of the disaster itself. For example, in Samoa, after the tsunami of 2009 and Cyclone Evan of 2012 that respectively killed 149 people and displaced close to 5000 persons, a study conducted by the IFRC (2016) revealed that the unequal distribution of relief supplies created disillusionment, agitation and community tensions, indirectly increasing the risk of physical violence amongst intimate partners. Risk of domestic violence was predominant in urban areas, where affected people had to cohabit for extended periods with host communities in crowded spaces, with inadequate lighting and sanitation facilities. Young girls and adolescents were particularly vulnerable to GBV (perpetrated by male adolescents and adults) due to reduced parental supervision during the day, when parents typically went to clean up and rebuild their damaged houses.

The same IFRC report (2016) shows the difficulties in identifying and isolating the incidence of GBV attributed to disasters alone. VAWG is a pervasive issue at a global scale, with one in every three women experiencing physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at some point in their lives (WHO, 2013). Similarly, the literature that documents GBV in war-affected areas predominantly looks at physical and sexual violence against women and girls perpetrated by combatants (Human Security Research Group, 2012). However, the Human Security Report of 2012 argues that the mainstream narrative ignores domestic sexual violence that occurs during war (or before and after war), which affects a far greater number of women than sexual violence perpetrated by militias, rebel groups and government forces. Therefore, whether or not disaster events increase the occurrence of violence, the fact is that GBV survivors are unlikely to seek help (IFRC, 2016; Gender and Disaster Pod, 2016), protection support might be unavailable or inadequate, and this discrepancy between the prevalence of violence and the lack of protection is exacerbated in the aftermath of a disaster. The overall limited institutional systems in place to prevent and respond to GBV as evidenced in countries like Samoa, Bangladesh and Myanmar reinforces the need for multi-stakeholder approaches to tackle GBV (ActionAid, 2014).

# Why should transformative resilience tackle unequal gendered norms?



The resilience literature highlights the opportunity for transformation after a disruption such as a disaster. In summary, societies affected by a crisis may demonstrate their resilience by transforming their functioning structure rather than maintaining the conditions that led to their societal vulnerability to disaster risks in the first place (Tanner et al., 2014). Transformative resilience implies changing the situation prior to a crisis and is inherently needed in resilience-building initiatives because the aim of resilience is to improve, rather than maintain the status-quo (Le Masson et al., 2015). Hence, if VAWG worsen following a disaster, power abuse in community settings has to be tackled and social relations must be transformed. As such, a transformative resilience perspective engages with gendered norms and seeks to promote context-relevant change (Reyes et al., 2013; Chanamoto and Hall, 2015).

However, the potential for transformation will depend on a combination of factors in the recovery process, including the influence of pre-existing discriminatory gendered norms that might dictate how the society

should be rebuilt, on whose terms and whose interest. As pointed out by Enarson (2014: 46), “What is done in the name of “recovery” can enhance or undermine the capacity and vulnerability of survivors, hence reducing, reproducing, or even increasing future disaster risk”. Oxfam’s latest framework for resilient development considers that social change processes should be supported at all stages of emergency response; from the urgent phase where resilience is more absorptive, to the recovery and reconstruction where adaptive and transformative resilience can foster more equitable social relations (Jeans et al., 2016). Therefore, the building of resilience has to be informed by evidence of social injustices and gender discriminations, and must integrate measures to tackle inequalities. A transformative resilience does not accept cultural relativism as an excuse to ignore social injustices (Reyes et al., 2013). In other words, a resilience building project has to address social exclusion and denial of people’s rights, particularly when vulnerability assessments gather evidence of GBV.

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GBV not only violates peoples' integrity and human rights and traumatises its survivors, but it also undermines the resilience of individuals, and the wider societies, making it harder to recover and rebuild (FAO, 2010; IASC, 2015).<sup>3</sup> For example, unhealed traumas may contribute to ongoing cycles of violence jeopardising development and/or peacebuilding efforts (Wessells, 2008 in Abozaglo, 2016). People's self-esteem, which typically decreases for GBV survivors, strongly influences perceptions and attitudes of their adaptive capacities and hence resilience (Leder, 2015). To ignore the gendered norms that underpin and perpetuate VAWG and to underestimate the efforts needed to tackle GBV in resilience or humanitarian approaches represents a failure to meet the most basic responsibilities for promoting and protecting the rights of affected populations (IASC, 2015). When GBV is not addressed in disaster response, the entire response can be negatively affected (IFRC, 2012). Inaction and/or poorly designed programmes can unintentionally cause further harm and the continuation of the cycle of violence (IRC, 2012; IASC, 2015); they can also contribute to a poor foundation for supporting the resilience of survivors, and create barriers to recovery. Some survivors of GBV may

later become perpetrators if their psychological, medical, and protection needs are not met (IASC, 2015), while inaction can indirectly or inadvertently lead to loss of lives in extreme cases (UNHCR, 2003).

There is a real risk that strategies might miss the opportunity for transformation, if they overlook or fail to address sticky gendered norms that prevent communities from strengthening their overall resilience (Skinner, 2011). Development programs may also attempt to return women who have experienced GBV to their traditional roles without assessing the implications and potential reaction of communities to returning survivors<sup>4</sup> (Jok, 2006). Similarly, if resilience programmes ignore gendered norms and the occurrence of VAWG, and if perpetrators of GBV are supported to maintain their roles and activities prior to the disaster, there is little chance that imbalanced power relations will change.

Finally, gender-blind resilience building initiatives might also exacerbate poverty and gender inequalities, through placing restrictions on traditional community activities (e.g. encouraging agriculture instead of supporting livestock rearing) or placing extra burden on those without rights or land tenure (Skinner, 2011).

# Implications for resilience programming



Building resilience: how one Nigerian village avoided malnutrition despite a drought.  
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A resilience approach which promotes transformation can help practitioners and researchers address some of the root causes of people's vulnerabilities which create disaster risks. It can do so through helping them choose the most appropriate strategy to tackle discriminatory gendered norms and violence in complex settings and through promoting capacity building and social empowerment (Reyes et al., 2013).<sup>5</sup> Whilst addressing gender inequalities remains challenging, there is evidence of success in increasing resilience when gender-sensitive approaches are adopted. For example, attention to women's needs and women's leadership in the peace process is key to resilient and sustainable peace (Faxon et al., 2015). Moreover, the provision of technical skills that do not reproduce traditional roles, when implementing resilience projects at the community level, is one example of a gender-transformative approach that allows women and men to take on new roles and responsibilities. Another example where resilience work can advance gender equality is the rebuilding of housing that is jointly titled in both partner's names (Enarson, 2014) and more generally, reconstruction efforts that avoid rebuilding structures which reproduce

patterns of inequality (Oliver-Smith, 1990). Oxfam's programme 'Raising Her Voice' is also a strategy to build resilience through addressing power relationships, strengthening personal knowledge and confidence among marginalised women, and tackling gender-based violence (Jeans et al, 2016).

In Syria, CARE uses a transformative approach to address GBV issues, to mitigate the risks people, and particularly women, face and amplifying the voices of Syrian women to be involved in decision-making and ownership of solutions (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016). CARE also uses various gender-sensitive programming strategies such as conducting gender analyses before initiating an intervention, including gender briefs for high disaster risk areas. Furthermore, it aims to ensure that its approach to gender equality is systematic, which is why it uses gender action plans (GAPs) in emergency, preparedness, response strategy and funding processes. When working with Syrian refugees in Jordan, CARE focused on protection and GBV systematically through capacity-building on prevention of GBV for all those involved in their programmes, ensuring that refugee

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women, girls, men and boys were consulted during programming (CARE International, 2016).

In the context of slow-onset disasters or longer-term environmental changes, CARE's programming has been supporting innovative responses to climate change through livelihood diversification led by women in many regions. For example, in Kenya women are strengthening their ability to diversify their incomes and reach new markets for their milk products. This is the result of increased access to climate information to better manage feed crops and livestock, coupled with financial inclusion programming that enables women to invest in capital-intensive equipment to grow their businesses (e.g. refrigerators). By supporting women to form dairy collectives, they have also increased their bargaining power with market brokers to ensure they receive fair prices. Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) initiatives implemented by CARE also have positive impacts on resilience through a transformative approach. VSLA activities combined with community-based adaptation to climate change support women's access to land and productive resources, thus increasing women's choices and decision-making power since they allow for independent income-generation from their savings and lending (CARE International, 2015).

Working together with men and traditional power holders in these programmes is necessary to change behaviour and attitudes around discriminatory gendered norms, as emphasised by practitioners in different contexts

(see Le Masson, 2016). The objective is not just for NGOs to encourage women to participate in financial decision-making within and outside the household. The point is to guarantee that other community members, particularly power holders, will contribute to, create and maintain an enabling environment for marginalised people to voice their needs and priorities. In the case of rural Bangladesh, Mahmud et al. (2012) show that women's empowerment is more likely to happen in supportive contexts and in form of collective empowerment processes, that deeply change entrenched gendered norms and behaviours.

Engaging men in vulnerability and capacity assessments ensures that transformation is long-lasting and can result in more equal opportunities for women and men to enhance their resilience (Morchain et al, 2015). The participation of men and boys is supported by many NGOs, including CARE, whose resilience programming in Burundi, for instance, focuses on addressing the prevalent gender expectations and social norms that push men and boys towards often harmful behaviours (Bayramov et al., 2015). In Ghana, CARE also worked with both women and men to understand climate risk and the vulnerability of their traditional farming practices. The programme has been helping farmers identify crops that are more stable economically and more climate sensitive whilst taking into consideration gendered norms, to support households develop new ways of coping that are sensitive to changing gender roles, and foster resilience in a transformative way (Webb, 2016).

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# Conclusion

Current evidence highlights that the disruption triggered by disasters can erode interpersonal relationships. More critically, the combination between community-based coping mechanisms and external assistance that form the overall response to disasters also impacts gender relations. The bulk of available studies show that many post-disaster contexts are characterised by the aggravation of traditional gender roles, discriminatory norms, VAWG and social inequalities- all important predictors of resilience (Bonanno et al., 2010).

Resilience-building initiatives can foster social empowerment (see Leder, 2015 for a review) and decrease

GBV if approached with a gender-sensitive lens; in turn, strategies to tackle GBV can increase resilience. Whilst emergency responses that focus on protection can support those most at-risk of violence, a resilience perspective provides a more intricate, multilevel, and multifaceted approach that has the potential to (and should) tackle the underlying causes of GBV and vulnerability to disaster risks. A transformative resilience approach calls for equal attention to GBV at both household and community levels, as well as to the social and institutional contexts that condone, promote, or mitigate violence (Morris, 2015; Reyes et al., 2013).

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# Recommendations for future research

- Data on GBV is widely recognised as being under-reported. Pre- and post-disaster vulnerability and capacity assessments should systematically consider the dimension of violence (not just sexual and physical violence, but verbal and emotional abuse, intimate-partner violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation). Given the social taboo surrounding GBV, cross-sectoral liaison between DRR and Protection practitioners can help the collection of sensitive data
- More qualitative, comparative and longitudinal research is needed to document how households and communities' adaptive strategies to risks have the potential to transform gender relations and social norms, in which contexts and under which circumstances
- Evaluations of the effectiveness of prevention and response to GBV could better inform and support resilience programming
- Future studies must address the lack of awareness and reporting of GBV against boys, men, gay men, lesbian women and transgendered individuals
- More research is needed to document the experience of divorced or widowed women, whose numbers increase following disasters
- Disaster-induced displacement and migration are likely to impact those left behind in terms of their roles, network support and opportunities. The implications of migration for potential shifts in power structures in places of origin and affected by disasters need further attention
- Individual and psychological resilience to GBV has predominantly taken place in Western or developed contexts (Sherwood, 2009). Future research should further highlight the double impact of disasters and violence on survivors to make social and gender injustice more visible and point out factors that help tackle inequalities.

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