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Gendered Impacts of the Earthquake and Responses in Nepal

ON APRIL 25, 2015, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake hit the central and western regions of Nepal. 8,881 people died as a result of this earthquake, the strong aftershocks, and the ensuing landslides. Over 602,000 houses were destroyed and more than 280,000 were partially damaged. Over 1,000 health facilities were damaged or destroyed, while over 100,000 persons were displaced into makeshift camps. Lack of food, water, and shelter, as well as the threat of landslides in the monsoon season, have kept many from returning home. As winter approaches, the need for sufficient shelter will become more acute.¹

In the face of this massive destruction and ongoing need, the Nepali government, civil society, local communities, and national and

1. See United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "25 April 2015 Nepal Earthquake Disaster Risk Reduction Situation Report," <http://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/44170>; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Nepal Earthquake: Weekly Situation Update, 21 August 2015," <http://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-earthquake-weekly-situation-update-21-august-2015>; Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, "Nepal Earthquake 2015, Post Disaster Needs Assessment," http://www.recoveryplatform.org/jp/pdf/Nepal_PDNA%20Volume%20A%20Final.pdf; World Health Organization, "Nepal Earthquake 2015: Situation Report #19," May 26, 2015, <http://www.searo.who.int/entity/emergencies/crises/nepal/who-sitrep19-26-may-2015.pdf?ua=1>; International Organization for Migration, "Displacement Tracking Matrix—Nepal Earthquake 2015," June 15, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2015-06-15%20-%20Nepal%20EQ%20DTM%20Report%20Round%202.pdf>; and Om Astha Rai, "Landslide Refugees," *Nepali Times*, June 27, 2015.

international aid agencies have all sought information in order to determine needs, priorities, and protocols. In this essay, I discuss some of the evidence base that has accrued over four months since the earthquake in order to understand the gendered impacts of both the earthquake and postearthquake responses in rural areas. Most of the information examined comes from Nepali news sources, governmental and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, and personal communications.² Two approaches can be used to understand the gendered impact of the earthquake in rural areas: (1) reading about widely publicized issues that are particular to women, and (2) through community and NGO actors' examination of local processes of relief distribution.³ I use both these approaches and illustrate potential gaps in the relief efforts.

1) REPORTS ON EFFECTS ON WOMEN

The major gender-related issues in rural areas postearthquake are: access to health services for pregnant women; poor mother-child nutrition; lack of water for sanitation; insufficient provision of supplies for menstruating women; violence against women, particularly sexual violence; and increased trafficking of women and children.⁴ All of these gender-related issues have been documented postearthquake and all are deserving of attention. However, there are a few patterns in this coverage—and resultant gaps—that merit special consideration.

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- 2. In particular, staff members from two Nepali organizations with whom I have a longstanding relationship have provided useful insights regarding their relief work: Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research, and Development (LI-BIRD); and Kopila Nepal.
 - 3. It should be noted that the boundary between urban and rural can be indistinct in Nepal. People in rural areas often have relatives who have migrated to cities or abroad, and conversely many people living in urban areas still have strong ties to the rural areas where they were born and still have relatives.
 - 4. See, for examples, Shreejana Shrestha, "The Sidelined Issue: Dealing with Reproductive Health During the Post Disaster Phase," *República*, May 14, 2015; Om Astha Rai, "Mothers and Babies," *Nepali Times*, August 5, 2015; Sahina Shrestha, "Sheltering Women," *Nepali Times*, June 12–18, 2015; Nagendra Adhikar, "Human Traffickers 'Active' in Quake Affected Villages," *Kathmandu Post*, August 21, 2015; and Jason Burke, "Indian Gangs Found Trafficking Women from Earthquake-Hit Nepal," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2015.

The first pattern to note is that the issues listed above are those that are considered particular to women, and each of them is tied to women's reproductive and familial roles. As more attention is given to such issues, less attention seems to be given to needs and means that women share with others, for example, food, shelter, access to medical care for non-reproductive health issues, livelihood opportunities, citizenship papers, and rights to property.⁵ Thus, women's primary roles of wife and mother are reinscribed, and less attention is given, for example, to the health of elderly women or to the well-being of women regardless of whether they are mothers or not. Also noteworthy is that in discussing issues of shame around menstruation and the risk of sexual violence, at times there is more emphasis on individual women's responses than those of the wider society. For example, one article stated that many women living in tents "don't have the courage to overcome the social disgrace and break the taboo that comes with menstruation. They instead opt to suffer in silence."⁶ In another example, flashlights were handed out as part of "dignity kits," which were thought to "reduce the risk of sexual violence," although the way in which this would occur is not specified.⁷ As with many conversations about violence against women worldwide, there is a lack of naming of who has committed the violence.

In line with the emphasis on women as reproductive actors, there is also a notable lack of information about the impacts of the earthquake on LGBTI persons in rural areas.⁸ This is a pressing issue given how transgender persons face many barriers to receiving citizenship cards and passports, despite the official recognition of a third gender by the

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5. In particular, women are now fighting for equal rights to pass on citizenship to their spouses and therefore to children, a provision which was denied in the recent draft of the constitution. See "Citizenship Provisions Discriminatory," *Himalayan Times*, July 2, 2015; and Om Astha Rai, "Mother's Name," *Nepali Times*, August 14–21, 2015; National Planning Commission, "Post-Disaster Needs Assessment," 56.; Binal Silwal, executive director of Kopila Nepal, interview with the author, July 17, 2015.
 6. Shrestha, "The Sidelined Issue."
 7. Other items included in the "dignity kits" were soap, sanitary pads, and clean clothes. See "Campaign Targeting Vulnerable Women Quake Victims Launched," *República*, August 30, 2015.
 8. LGBTI is one common acronym used by advocacy organizations, although the umbrella term includes identity formations and experiences that are distinct from the places in which this term originated.

government of Nepal. Following the floods in southern Nepal in 2008, those whose documents indicated a gender identity different from the one they presented were unable to register in relief camps, seek medical attention, or enroll in school.⁹

An exception to the postearthquake focus on women's reproductive health issues can be found in discussions of unmarried women, as well as those whose husbands are working abroad, as it is acknowledged that they face particular difficulties in obtaining relief and support for housing reconstruction.¹⁰ The Nepali government's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), which was conducted by the Nepal Planning Commission and used as a blueprint in the International Conference on Nepal's Reconstruction, notes that the relative lack of land ownership and property ownership among women, Dalits, and some other ethnic groups puts them at risk of being excluded in owner-driven reconstruction approaches to housing.¹¹ The PDNA also recognizes women's role in agriculture and small businesses, stating that the majority of farmers in the affected areas are, in fact, women. It notes that they will be most affected by the loss of crops, agricultural tools, storage and processing facilities, and seeds, which in turn may increase food insecurity and work burdens. Difficulties related to water for irrigation and household use were also linked in the report to increased work burden for women and girls who would need to travel further to fetch and carry water.¹²

There is a tendency to take up women's issues as technical problems requiring technical solutions. Such solutions can indeed be helpful, but they do not address women's diverse social positions and the barriers women face on account of these positions. For example, while easing

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9. See Basil Edward Teo, "Equality in Paper at Least," *Nepali Times*, August 1–7, 2014; and Kyle Knight and Courtney Welton-Mitchell, "Gender Identity and Disaster Response in Nepal," *Forced Migration Review* 42 (April 2013).
 10. See, for example, Rojita Adhikari, "2,000 Widows," *Nepali Times*, August 12, 2015; and Mallika Aryal, "Aftershocks in a Migrant Economy," *Nepali Times*, May 8–14, 2005.
 11. Although the caste system is not a legally recognized entity in Nepal, caste-based discrimination still exists in various forms in various places. The term "Dalit" refers to members of the lower castes and has been adopted by important regional, national, and transnational organizations advocating for their rights.
 12. National Planning Commission, "Post-Disaster Needs Assessment," 21, 23, 27, 62, and xvii.

women's work burdens could create time for women to rest, take care of their health, or engage in a variety of empowering activities, it does not directly address women's decision-making power over their work, and in some cases it can serve to reify the notion of women's work as separate (and less well-paid or inferior) from men's. Additionally, solutions that do not recognize ethnic and other differences can paint a broad picture of a patriarchal rural Nepal, which renders invisible the diverse gender roles and family practices that exist in the country.¹³

2) CASE STUDIES ABOUT RELIEF DISTRIBUTION

The gendered impacts of the earthquake and its aftermath can be further understood by examining sources that are not explicitly about women. Case studies about the impacts of the earthquake and relief distribution contain evidence of inequalities in distribution and reconstruction. In some village development committees, the smallest administrative and local governance units of Nepal, wealthier households deliberately gave large proportions of their food relief to poorer households. In others, residents demanded equal distribution of relief goods, even when the impacts of the earthquake were unequal among households, or when some residents had already received support through their own social connections. In still other places, the most marginalized households, such as those headed by single women or Dalits, did not receive the distributed goods, either through neglect or as a result of outright discrimination.¹⁴

13. In 1992, Stacey Pigg argued that the discourse of development constructed a universalized "generic village" that was underdeveloped. Diverse ethnicities were rarely perceived, or they were often evaluated through the lens of high-caste Hindu norms held by major development actors. Stacey Leigh Pigg, "Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (July 1992): 499, 505. Other analyses have shown that constructions of a unified "agency-less 'Nepali woman'" have legitimated laws and development programs that may have actually restricted women's roles and rights in some of Nepal's nondominant ethnic communities. See Seira Tamang, "Dis-embedding the Sexual/Social Contract: Citizenship and Gender in Nepal," *Citizenship Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 314; and Seira Tamang, "Legalizing State Patriarchy in Nepal," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (June 2000): 137, 141.

14. Dalit Civil Society Massive Earthquake Victim Support and Coordination Committee, Asia Dalit Rights Forum (ADR), and National Dalit Watch, "Waiting for 'Justice in Response': Report of Initial Findings from Immediate Needs Assessment and Monitoring Responses towards Affected Dalit

One worker in a village development committee in Dolakha District, when asked specifically about the gender impacts of the earthquake, reported that due to high male out-migration, women were most affected by the earthquake in terms of their daily work and also because they had to make decisions about rebuilding with minimal input from family members. Participation of women in needs assessment and planning at the community level was low, both in terms of attendance in meetings and in speaking at meetings, and there appeared to be little will on the part of local leaders to engage them. When relief workers tried to ask women about their specific needs, such as sanitary pads or child-specific foods, the women said that this was not needed.¹⁵ This could mean that such items were not a priority for women in this particular place, or conversely, it could indicate that women were not comfortable discussing issues considered private or taboo such as menstruation.

A relief and rebuilding program coordinator found that girls were especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Although women and children were prioritized in earthquake rescue efforts, households headed by single women and elderly and disabled women had the least access to relief materials. Long distances to distribution sites were a contributing factor, not only due to disability and infirmity, but also due to women's larger role caring for children and completing household work.¹⁶ A report by the Inter-Party Women's Alliance noted that there was a lack of representation of women in disaster management committees at the local level.¹⁷

One effect of development projects is that the actors tend to find evidence that supports the kind of programs that they provide. In many cases this may lead to the provision of services that are truly helpful, and in some cases it has meant providing services that are easier or more lucrative, rather than those that are good for service users. After the earthquake, this issue was apparent when some donors sent what they

Communities in Nepal Earthquake 2015," <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/REPORT-OF-IMMEDIATE-ASSESSMENT-Relief-for-Dalits-in-NEPAL-2015.pdf>; Niranjan Pudasaini of LI-BIRD, email with the author, August 13, 2015.

15. Niranjan Pudasaini of LI-BIRD, email with the author, August 13, 2015.
16. Bharat Bhandari of LI-BIRD, email with the author, August 30, 2015.
17. See "Women Have Little Access to Relief: IPWA Report," *Kathmandu Times*, July 30, 2015.

had rather than what was needed, such as boxes of old and tattered clothing, or onions and garlic.¹⁸

The issue of grassroots accountability is paramount for governmental and NGO institutions alike. Although many institutions doing good work build in accountability and feedback mechanisms at the local level, NGOs are primarily accountable to donors. Similarly, local government accountability is limited by the fact that the last local elections held in Nepal were in 1997.¹⁹

IMPLICATIONS

After the earthquake, an overemphasis on technical solutions and the use of discourses that essentialize “women’s” experiences could serve to legitimize state and development expansion into these areas in ways that do not recognize the experiences, priorities, and agency of diverse residents. Even the best one-off services can lose their meaning when holistic needs are not met and vulnerabilities based in poverty or discrimination are not addressed. If services are uniformly applied to all women, those with more power, money, or status are more likely to benefit. And when marginalized community members are not fully involved, relief efforts can lead to more entrenched disparities.

Nepal is of course not new to advocacy work on behalf of women. Countless women’s groups have been formed and many of these have been sites for sharing experiences and collective action. Some organizations, such as Kopila Nepal, have facilitated the formation of groups specifically for marginalized women, who have, as a result, gained increased voice and respect in the community. The Nepali government has acknowledged the need for greater community participation in decision making regarding disaster reconstruction.²⁰ The extent to which marginalized women and LGBTI people will have a voice in their communities will depend on how the policy is formulated, who is recognized, and the degree to which it is implemented by both government and NGO actors.

18. Hari Kumar Shrestha, “TIA Customs Yard Full of Unclaimed Relief Goods,” *Nepal Mountain News*, June 17, 2015; Binal Silwal, executive director of Kopila Nepal, interview with the author, July 17, 2015; Narhari Sapkota, “WFP Withdraws Rotten Rice, 133 Laprak Households Get Fresh Supply,” *República*, July 2, 2015.
19. Kunda Dixit, “Vacuum in the Villages,” *Nepali Times*, April 18–24, 2015; Binayak Basnyat, “Grassroots Elections,” *Kathmandu Post*, August 30, 2015.
20. National Planning Commission, “Post-Disaster Needs Assessment,” 85.