Gender and Disaster: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Violence Against Women in Nepal

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Abstract

In April 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit the Gorkha district of Nepal. This was followed in May by a second earthquake. Nepal experienced another natural disaster in 2017. Floods affected large swathes of the country from east to west. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, this article examines the impact of these climate disasters on violence against women. In doing so, it adds to a small but growing and fundamentally important body of literature that explores the intersections of gendered violence and natural disaster. It is well-established that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. What we know much less about is how other events impact on these figures. Given the growing intensity of climate change and the reality that adverse impacts are here to stay, understanding the detrimental legacy of natural disasters is now more urgent than ever.

Keywords

Women, Nepal, displacement, violence, climate

Introduction

In April 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit the Gorkha district of Nepal. This was followed in May by a second earthquake, almost as severe, that struck an area near Mount Everest. These earthquakes had devastating effects, causing approximately 9000 deaths and 23,000 further injuries. In total, 600,000 homes were destroyed and nearly 300,000 more homes suffered substantial damage that necessitated the removal of inhabitants to temporary shelters. This disaster affected nearly a third of the Nepalese population (ActionAid, 2021). As it struggled to come to terms with the serious ramifications of the earthquakes, however, Nepal experienced another natural disaster in

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2017. Floods affected large swathes of the country from east to west, destroying or damaging nearly 200,000 homes and leaving many homeless, with poor access to food, water and other basic goods (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Using both qualitative and quantitative data gathered during 2018 and 2019, this article examines the impact of these natural disasters on violence against women during the post-disaster reconstruction phases of the 2015 earthquake and the 2017 floods.

In doing so, it adds to a small but growing and fundamentally important body of literature that explores the intersections of gendered violence and natural disasters. Substantial data exist on the prevalence of violence against women (VAW) generally; for example, it is well-established that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence (United Nations, 1993). What we know much less about is how other events impact on these figures, especially major traumatic events that lead frequently to the loss of homes and access to resources. Given the growing intensity of climate change and the reality that adverse impacts are here to stay, understanding at a more micro level the detrimental legacy of natural disasters is now more urgent than ever. In assessing the impact of climate trauma on rates of VAWG, we break down the aftermath according to a number of well-established stages in disaster relief work; rescues, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. In doing so, we are able to consider at which (if any) point is violence against women and girls (VAWG) a more significant problem and at what point should specific measures be brought in to mitigate its likely rise.

Defining violence against women (VAW)

A lack of clarity across contexts and academic fields can lead to difficulty in cross-cultural approaches to programme and policy design. In research on VAW, a broad definition of violence is required, which recognises that violence is both a physical and psychological phenomenon that operates on multiple levels from the personal to the macro-structural. We have chosen, therefore, to adopt the declaration on the elimination of violence against women (DEVAW) definition of VAW:

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women and/or girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. (UN, 1993)

Violence against women: both universal and contextual

In general terms VAW is an endemic global problem, with over a third of women having experienced VAW globally (WHO et al., 2013). Some experts argue that universal (cross-cultural) risk factors for VAW perpetration can be identified, including patriarchal privilege, poverty, childhood experience of violence and neglect, substance abuse and mental health concerns (Gibbs et al., 2020). However, while considering universal factors may be helpful, their intersection with diverse features of different sociocultural environments create contextual particularities that must be understood if interventions are to succeed.

VAW is broadly universal, and yet is entirely context-specific in terms of its triggers and manifestations. If it is to be prevented, this complexity must be understood in terms of the interplay of various contextual factors operating from the personal to the structural level of society. Gender norms are embedded in complex webs of symbolic and material culture that are reflected in institutional structures such as the media, religious teachings and legal frameworks. These factors combine to create unique environments that perpetuate discriminatory behaviour based on interlinked

understandings of ethnicity, race, gender, age class and caste. Understanding localised manifestations of VAW therefore requires in-depth, context-specific qualitative research complemented and at least partially directed by quantitative findings.

Exploring the literature on gender and disaster

It is widely recognised that women and men experience disasters differently, with women's vulnerabilities invariably greater than men's in both developed and developing countries (e.g. Bradshaw, 2013, 2015; Enarson and Chakrabarti, 2009; Enarson et al., 2018; Fisher, 2010; Fothergill, 2004; Harville et al., 2010; Nasreen, 2010; Richter, 2011; Sanz et al., 2009; Urrutia et al., 2012). The gender and disaster field of research has expanded significantly in the last decade (c.f. Enarson et al., 2018). However, there is substantially less data available in relation to developing than developed countries (with data on the US predominant), and there is virtually no international data for Nepal.[1] If one considers that, both pre- and post-disaster, 'the poor receive inequitable access to available resources in aid, health care, and mitigation skills, and, in general, the poorest of the poor are women' (Richter, 2011: 21), then the need for more research in this area becomes increasingly clear. Applying a more precise framework in assessing the differing vulnerabilities experienced as a result of disaster is also helpful hence our suggestion that the aftermath is approached as a series of stages. Each period could be seen as an opportunity to halt deepening risks or represent critical moments where more intense harm is likely.

Although women's vulnerability in times of disaster relates both to gender differences and inequalities (e.g. pregnancy can limit women's physical abilities and it confers specific needs), it is social inequalities that are most important (Blaikie et al., 1994; Enarson et al., 2018; Thomas and et al., 2013). In developing countries, research shows that women are more likely to die than men during natural disasters (Anderson, 2000; Cutter, 1995; Ikeda, 1995; Rivers, 1982), and gendered social roles explain this. For example, men were much less likely to die during the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka because of gendered social roles and expectations (Oxfam, 2005).

Disasters intensify the domestic burden placed on women. Chant's arguments about the 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation' have also been applied to disaster response initiatives by Bradshaw (2015), who argues that they construct women as both an at-risk group and a means to reduce risk. Disaster response initiatives can increase women's burdens when too much impetus is put on women as the drivers of reconstruction and risk reduction. Alternatively, interventions that are not formulated in partnership with local women or that disseminate relief aid primarily through male household heads aggravate the problem of women's limited access to resources and lack of decision-making power (Byrne and Baden, 1995; Enarson and Morrow, 1997). Disaster programmes therefore need to be designed in careful balance, with gender concerns more sensitively mainstreamed throughout. A gender sensitive lens needs to be applied as part of the immediate rescue and relief stages and continue into the more medium to long-term reconstruction activities.

Existing evidence on violence against women (VAW) and disaster

Women's vulnerability to VAW post-disaster has been emphasised frequently in relation to severe displacement, whereby women are forced to leave their homes and live in temporary camps in other parts of their countries or abroad. Situations in refugee camps present a myriad of gendered concerns including increased domestic tensions, but concerns like the lack of street-lighting and long distances to sanitation facilities and firewood sources also leave women susceptible to violent attacks by strangers (Bradley and Liakos, 2019). Such attacks are perpetrated against women and

girls by other refugees as well as those with protection mandates, including security forces and aid workers (Ferris, 2007; Freedman, 2015). Other research highlights the proliferation of opportunities for abuse in cases of rural–urban displacement when women are separated from their usual social networks. Women lack the protection of friends and family members, and their economic struggles make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and prostitution, again sometimes by authority figures with protection mandates (Wiest et al., 1994).[2]

Data on VAW during natural disasters are limited and tends to relate mostly to North America. Even so, this small body of research is rigorous and strong, evidencing clear connections between disaster and increased VAW, particularly intimate partner violence (IPV; for example, Anastario et al., 2009; Dobson, 1994; Enarson, 1999, 2012; Enarson and Morrow, 1997; Fothergill, 1998, 1999, 2004; Parkinson, 2019; Picardo et al., 2010; Thomas and et al, 2013; Wilson et al., 1998).

International research on the VAW-natural disaster nexus in developing countries is, unfortunately, even more limited. In relation to Nepal, we are aware of only one study exploring the impact of recent natural disasters on women's lives (Fothergill and Squire, 2018). We note that a post-disaster needs assessment was conducted by the government of Nepal which gave a detailed analysis of how the earthquake of 2015 had impacted on different sectors but it did not capture data in increases in violence (PDNA, 2015). That paper provides useful insights, but as a result of its small sample size, it is unable to draw reliably broad conclusions, and it has little to say about VAW.[3] However, there have been enough studies to demonstrate that the same gendered relationship between violence and disaster exists outside economically developed countries. For example, VAW has been negatively impacted by the earthquake in Haiti (Farmer, 2011; Haiti Gender Equality Collective, 2010), by floods and a cyclone in Bangladesh (Kafi, 1992; Nasreen, 2010), by Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua and Honduras (Delaney and Shrader, 2000), by a volcanic eruption in the Philippines (Delica, 1998) and by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean (Fisher, 2009; Mulligan and Shaw, 2011). What this literature also does not do is break down the immediate aftermath of a disaster in a way that allows for more micro considerations of how prevailing gendered norms play out through the sequence of stages that follow.

We know that disasters in themselves do not cause violence, but rather that existing gender inequalities are exacerbated by the extreme situations that disasters inevitably cause. Non-disaster research has shown that IPV is located in patriarchal social norms, and that when these are challenged men may use violence to reinforce their control over women (Abrahams et al., 2009; Connell, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2011). In disaster research (see Byrne and Baden, 1995; Morrow, 1997), it has been argued that these pressures intensify further. In addition, men are more likely to abuse alcohol or other substances at times of stress and this can lead to violent gendered behaviour (Abramsky et al., 2011; Delaney and Shrader, 2000; IAI, 1990; Wiest et al., 1994).

In this article, we first offer a brief overview of gendered violence in Nepal before the earthquakes of 2015, and then we proceed to discuss the research data exploring the post-disaster context.

VAW in Nepal pre-2015

A government study of gender-based violence in rural areas in Nepal reported that 48% of women had experienced violence, with 28% having experienced it in the last year (Office of the PM, 2012). Nearly three quarters of those who reported having experienced violence named intimate partners as the primary perpetrators. Similar numbers are reported by the Asia Foundation (2010), while other studies have reported substantially higher rates of violence among young women (Puri et al., 2011 cited in UNFPA, 2014). In addition,

Both men and women in the UNFPA Nepal Perception Survey, 2013, reported that battering women, torturing them, rape, girl trafficking, polygamy, discrimination between son and daughter and child marriage [were] common forms of GBV. (UNFPA, 2014: 5)

In 2009, Nepal passed its first domestic violence law, the Domestic Violence and Punishment Act, which defines domestic violence as physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse (OECD, 2014). However, as the studies above show, domestic violence remains a serious problem (see also HRW, 2020; IFRC, 2017; UNFPA, 2014; USDS, 2014) and it has been argued that the new law is unlikely to make significant impact unless its sanctions are strengthened and legal processes become more accessible for women (OECD, 2014; Saathi, 2009; UNFPA & ICRW, 2017). Domestic violence remains underreported in Nepal, and most cases are still settled by mediation rather than prosecution because the police remain reluctant to treat it as a criminal offence (USDS, 2013, 2014). Perhaps the biggest obstacle to enforcing the law, however, has been public awareness of it; in 2012, most Nepalese women (61%) were unaware of any laws addressing gender-based violence, and only 13% were aware of there being a law against domestic violence (Office of the PM, 2012).

In 2012, official government data found that women from lower caste groups, religious minority groups, widowed, divorced or separated women, and women living in the hill regions, were significantly more likely to have experienced violence during their lifetimes (OECD, 2014). The CEDAW Committee (2011) expressed concern about the lack of data on these groups and this still remains an issue in 2020.

The impact of natural disasters on Nepalese women

We move now to present our research data and findings. Our field sites were in Kathmandu and Morang districts. In Morang District, Katahari Rural Municipality and the city of Biratnagar were selected for the study. These areas were badly affected by the floods of 2017. In Kathmandu District, which was severely affected by the April 2015 earthquake, Shankharapur Municipality was selected. This area is about 37 km from Kathmandu city in the north-eastern part of the valley. We also interviewed women in the city of Kathmandu.

The authors and a team of local researchers collected data through both quantitative and qualitative channels. In addition to 20 stakeholder interviews conducted across both sites, we conducted 53 in-depth qualitative interviews across the two districts. We also implemented a quantitative survey with 880 respondents (49% from Kathmandu District and 51% from Morang District). We included both men and women in the survey, albeit prioritising the need for female respondents who ultimately comprised 83%. Respondents were between 18 and 49 years of age with a mixture of caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Most respondents were married and lived with their spouses (93%).

To find participants a mix of purposive and random sampling was applied. We employed a clustered sampling strategy, where we first selected the districts, clusters (i.e. villages/municipality) and then households. Districts and villages or municipality were selected purposively in order to locate the specific groups of interest, and to ensure a mix of caste groupings as well as other intersectional factors such as religion and socio-economic status. We attempted to achieve representativeness at the study level through random sampling. For the qualitative interviews, we conducted a number before the start of the survey in order to inform the survey design. The selection of who to interview at this first stage was determined by an intersectional approach; we wanted to capture a range of participants to help us understand possible patterns and differences that we might want

to test for in the survey. While the survey was being conducted qualitative interviews continued, with useful participants being identified throughout the process.

Violence against women in the field sites

According to the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from women in both districts, VAW is highly prevalent (57% of female respondents stated that it is common or very common). Male respondents across both sites suggested that prevalence was lower, and in Morang specifically, 100% of male respondents said that VAW is either quite rare or very rare.

Intimate partner violence (IPV)

In both the quantitative and qualitative data sets, more than two-thirds of participants reported that IPV was the most common form of VAW in our field sites. In total, 71% reported this in the survey with the second most common category of perpetrator being mothers-in-law (8% agreement). These findings from our primary data collection appear to align with demographic and health survey (DHS) data (NDHS, 2016).

Out of 720 female respondents across districts, 261 (36%) reported that they had experienced IPV personally. Of 144 male respondents, 57 (40%) admitted to perpetrating IPV. Of the 318 respondents who reported experiencing or perpetrating IPV, 112 (35%) reported that physical violence had occurred in the last 0–11 months.

We know that sexual violence is underreported in research due to the sensitivity and stigmatisation associated with it, especially when it occurs within spousal relationships. However, 14% of the women surveyed in our sites claimed to have experienced extreme sexual violence in the last 0–11 months. Male participants in the main denied that sexual violence against women was a problem, however. Indeed, all of the male study participants denied that forced sexual intercourse perpetrated by the husband occurred in their households. In total, 13% of women, however, claimed to have experienced it. This reveals stark differences in perceptions across genders and points to a more intense normalisation in the male view of violence against women compared to the female perspective.

As per the Nepalese DHS (2016), 7% of women have ever experienced sexual violence and 3% have experienced sexual violence in the past year. This suggests that instances of sexual violence are substantially more prevalent than the pre-2015 country norm in the districts that we studied post-disaster. In our qualitative interviews, women expounded on their concerns, sharing experiences of feeling very unsafe at home, for example,

> I feel insecure with my husband. He forcefully had sex with me even when I was ill. When we are not physically healthy, we don't feel like having sex, but it happened with me.

> Since the earthquake everyone has experienced more tension. Often men find that sex helps with this and they insist on their wives whether the woman wants to or not.

Trafficking risk

Reports suggest that trafficking of persons increased significantly after the earthquake (Burke, 2015; Gyawali et al., 2017; Moura, 2020). International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Nepal highlighted this issue as a matter of urgent priority (e.g. Plan Int'l, 2015; UNICEF, 2015) and local NGOs voiced similar concerns (c.f. Standing et al., 2016). Children were

particularly at risk when they were separated from families, or when decimated family incomes made traffickers' promises of better lives for children abroad more appealing. Single and widowed women also found themselves at increased risk. However, although our participants were aware of the trafficking issue at a social level, none expressed concerns about it in their own lives. The qualitative interviews emphasised that trafficking tended to be an issue in camps, and was less of a concern for families who were not displaced or who had only moved a short distance, remaining within the confines of their original communities.

Stranger violence

In our quantitative survey, only 1% of respondents believed that when incidents of VAW occurred they were most likely to be committed by an unknown person. The qualitative interviews similarly revealed that very few women are concerned about the possibility of being attacked by strangers. Only one woman expressed worry about stranger rape, and this concern was centred on social responses to rape victims:

> Yes . . . some people might rape us or do (sex) forcefully. How will the society react towards us if anybody does this forcefully to us? That kind of fear is still instilled in my mind.

Other women noted that 'eve teasing' is a problem they have always faced; this includes men making inappropriate lewd comments to women in the streets and wolf-whistling. This was considered an irritation rather than a danger, faced especially by women who must travel to reach their workplaces. Public transport was mentioned multiple times as a concern for women who regularly face groping and harassment on buses. However, this did not extend to deep-seated concerns about physical violence.

This lack of anxiety about stranger violence does not reflect other research in post-disaster Nepal. For example, Standing et al (2016) explore the ways in which women and girls living in temporary camps after the earthquake had to negotiate risks including groups of drunk men entering the camps looking for sex, rapists entering people's tents, unsafe sanitation facilities and a lack of protection from police and other authorities who are also sometimes guilty of abusing women and girls. These risks are of great importance to women living in temporary camps after disasters. However, in our field sites, nobody had experienced living in camps. Other research that focuses on the impact of severe displacement in Nepal post-disaster understandably raises slightly different issues in relation to VAW, therefore (see also ICGTF, 2015). What these sources show is the need for a VAW sensitive lens to be applied at the relief stage of disaster response. Simple adjustments can be made to improve the safety of women if the planning of a temporary camp is approached with the likely VAWG risk factors in mind (e.g. position of toilets and lighting inside and outside of tents).

Reporting violence and seeking help

In terms of reporting rates, only 8% of the women surveyed who had experienced violence reported they had attempted to seek help at the time. This is much lower than the 22% of women in the NDHS (2016) who were reported to have sought help. The qualitative data help us to understand why this might be. For example:

> . . . no one talks about it [VAW] because of shame and embarrassment. Women usually suppress their problems within themselves . . . That is also one of the reasons for the prevalence of violence in the society.

> . . . people do not know that a man cannot beat his wife or force her to have sex. They don't know that this is the law. Most people believe that a husband can do what he likes – when he has a wife she is his property to do what he likes [with].

Regarding perceptions of the most effective avenue for support currently, men in our survey prioritised police services while women felt that female family and community members were best placed to support them, reflecting similar views as the NDHS (2016). We will return to this in detail later in the paper.

Explaining post-disaster increases in VAW

Factor 1: displacement

The relationship between displacement and VAW in our field sites is subtle, appearing clearly only through qualitative interviews. Half of our study participants were living in temporary accommodation, having endured destruction of their homes in the earthquake or flood. Reconstruction has only just started which means that most people are living in a rehabilitation stage but not yet back to 'normal' life in terms of living in rebuilt homes. The quantitative data in relation to displacement as a trigger for VAW did not provide particularly strong results in comparison to other factors. Figures were similar in both districts, with only 49% of participants believing that displacement is likely to cause instances of VAW in the community anywhere from once a year to once a day.

Given the importance of displacement in the wider context of the gender and disaster literature, this may initially seem somewhat surprising. However, we believe that the specific type of displacement experienced in Nepal after these disasters is largely explanatory of this discrepancy. Unlike in many disasters where people are forced to flee substantial distances and/or relocate to camps, most of the victims of the Nepalese disasters were displaced by mere metres. The majority of people whose homes were destroyed were able to erect temporary shelters within sight of their permanent homes and therefore the communities in which they lived and the social structures upon which they usually relied did not generally change a great deal. As noted earlier, this means that vulnerability to stranger violence is kept to original levels as women.

It is notable that, although our participants were not severely displaced themselves, they did occasionally talk about stories they had heard from where more disruptive displacement had occurred. More extreme displacement was discussed in qualitative interviews very differently. It was clear that shared shelter conditions following the earthquake had been deeply problematic, particularly in terms of their contribution to sexual violence risk. For example,

> There was lots of talk of sexual violence in communal shelters, also of husbands forcing sex.

However, returning to the personal experiences of our participants, the qualitative interviews drew out issues that did in fact link the minor (i.e. short distance) displacement and VAW. Unsurprisingly, familial tensions were markedly increased following the disasters. The tensions were partially linked to the stresses of living in uncomfortable makeshift housing after homes were destroyed. However, these tensions were discussed by participants not as problems with displacement but rather with housing conditions. While in a broader sense, we might see the two as linked our participants did not make the association.

Factor 2: housing conditions

Although not as severe an issue as it is in cases of major displacement to camps (e.g. Fisher, 2010; Standing et al., 2016), living conditions after minor displacement are a real problem for couples

and families. The makeshift tin shelters in which many of our participants live or have lived tend to be one or two small rooms[4] in which extended families live and store all of their possessions. They are extremely uncomfortable; they do not protect well from either hot or cold weather, and people are in constant fear of significant weather events such as storms, which can destroy the structures completely.

All of our female study participants have traditionally been responsible for domestic tasks in the home (cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc.). However, since the destruction of their homes, they have also become primarily responsible for their reconstruction while male family seek waged work. In addition to the dangerous process of sifting through rubble to find possessions and set up their new shelters, low-income women, in particular, have often been tasked with the job of rebuilding original homes. This makes the usual domestic tasks difficult to accomplish, and 59% of our survey respondents reported that this inability to perform household chores to a high standard caused violence against women. The qualitative interviews drew this link much more strongly, with almost all of those interviewed discussing the issue.

Combined with the trauma of losing homes and belongings, the new living conditions raise stress levels for all family members. This is compounded by the lack of privacy offered by the shelters. With entire extended families sleeping in one room, women are often uncomfortable with the prospect of sexual intimacy. Male responses to this are reported to be less than understanding, resulting either in violent arguments or at times marital rape while children and elderly parents are sleeping (see also Delica, 1998; Fisher, 2010).

Factor 3: alcohol

Data from both districts suggests that male alcohol consumption is regarded as the primary trigger for VAW:

> In my personal view, alcohol leads to violence and should be banned. Men consume alcohol after getting their salary and so are unable to provide food to their wives . . . men spend all of their money in alcohol which results in violence.

> He beat me under the influence of alcohol. He first started scolding me when he got drunk. I thought that the fight could go overboard so I went to stay at my sister's house nearby. However, he came looking for me . . . [and] asked me to come back home. But I told him that I will not go . . . After that he pulled me and hit me with a [piece of] wood. Then I fell down. After that, I thought I will not go with him and turned away from him. However, he hit me from behind and I collapsed.

> Usually, the violence starts when the husbands drink alcohol and come home. The wives tell their husbands that instead of feeding their children, their husbands wasted the money in alcohol. That is how the violence occurs . . . We should not go between their fights because we might get into difficulty.

The research made clear that men tend to express their psychological trauma violently after consuming alcohol, and that consumption had increased for many men since the disasters. The alcohol/violence relationship is a common finding in disaster literature (Catani et al., 2008; Delaney and Shrader, 2000; Miller et al., 1981; Phifer, 1990; Weitzman and Behrman, 2015), but this relationship is difficult to unpack without further investigation. Although alcohol is undeniably linked to violent behaviour, it is impossible to say whether these men would be violent without the concurrent psychological trauma caused by the disasters, as well as other stresses such as poverty.

It should be noted that alcohol itself does not cause VAW; VAW is caused by gendered inequalities that other factors, including alcohol and stress, exacerbate. Deraniyagala separates 'isolated' or

'immediate' factors from the 'true' foundational cause which is useful in understanding how the likelihood of VAW can intensify when additional risks come into play (Fisher, 2010).

Factor 4: multi-factorial social vulnerability

While our study participants saw alcohol as a major problem, by contrast, low income was not considered to be a trigger for VAW. Nonetheless, violence was more likely to be reported in the study by those with lower incomes. This points towards the links between violence and issues such as stress, poverty, alcohol abuse and cultural forms of discrimination that are not always evident at a surface level. Such factors are interwoven in ways that is difficult to track without a specifically tailored research design.

Our quantitative and qualitative data did find that lower caste communities, which also tend to be the poorest, have the highest VAW rates. The female survey respondents from the Terai Dalit community were found to be the most affected by violence: out of 228 respondents, 52% were personally affected by VAW:

> Women violence is increasing in this society. Harassment is increasing. Torture is being increased . . . On a daily basis, they are being beaten. If they give a birth to a baby girl, they are being beaten. They are tortured through dowry.

Traditional forms of discrimination exist in all cultures, and they feed into the vulnerability levels of segregated social groups including minority ethnic communities and those of low caste. To address this would require action to reduce the threats of violence that are intertwined with economic discrimination, political marginalisation and social bias. A fundamental message here is that ' . . . the social disadvantages that our society treats as ordinary and unremarkable become deadly in dramatic ways in the course of a disaster' (Farber, n.d. quoted in Phillips and Jenkins 2013: 323).

Literacy levels share a similar relationship with poverty and with VAW; illiterate women were more vulnerable to physical violence with 62% of the 261 illiterate women interviewed reporting it. As per the NDHS (2016), the likelihood of experiencing physical violence declines with a woman's level of education. It reports that 34% of women with no education have experienced physical violence, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 women with secondary level or higher education (8%).

Discrimination against disabled women is also clear in both sites with associated rises in susceptibility to violence post-earthquake:

> They hate me. They even told me I am like a dog and an elephant.

Our quantitative survey was not designed to collect these data, but the qualitative interviews revealed a general pattern of vulnerability, especially to IPV. We do not have enough data to explore this in detail here, but note that the finding reflects data from other studies which show that Nepalese women with disabilities are more likely to experience VAW; according to CREPHA (2011), 58% of disabled women have experienced violence, with 42% in the last year. Moreover, CREHPA (2011) reports that 51% of disabled women have experienced IPV. Eide et al (2016) also report that abuse increases with severity of disability and Clark et al (2017) find that VAW reporting rates decline with severity of disability.

Responding to VAW post-disaster: what works?

In this section, we consider the ways in which women respond to the experience of violence, and think about what works best both to prevent and respond to VAW in our field sites. Across both

field sites family members (52%) were reported as the first option for support, followed by peer networks (35%). The third option was local government at 25%.

State actors

Interestingly, trust in local government figures to deal with instances of VAW is high in Morang but not in Kathmandu. We believe that this may be down to the targeted recruitment of trusted social mobilisers into government in Morang District, but it requires further investigation.

Non-state actors

Options for support from non-state actors are hampered by an inconsistent awareness among local civil society and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) around the likelihood of increased VAW after natural disasters. In our interviews with stakeholders from these groups a division was apparent between those that understood the need to factor in a response to violence in their emergency programming, and those that simply did not see it as a priority. Organisations with pre-existing gender focuses replied in similar ways, for example,

> During disasters women are not in their homes, which makes them vulnerable to sexual predators. (INGO employee)

> At the time of calamity sexual violence increases rapidly as women stay in shelters that are quite open and the space is shared . . . So in situations like those the chances of sexual violence increase quite a lot. (INGO employee)

Responses such as these, while indicative of a commitment to address VAW, do not demonstrate an understanding of how minor displacement (as discussed earlier) impacts on VAW. No stakeholders addressed this issue directly, although some showed an awareness of the IPV-disaster link. Clearly, organisations need to be educated or informed of the impact of minor displacement on VAW for future programming:

> Nowadays cases of domestic violence can be seen where required supplies are not provided to the women. (INGO employee)

> It is not safe at all because during that [disaster] time even the people who are relatives tend to molest. (Local NGO employee)

The views given above contrast sharply with those shared by employees of organisations that do not have a specific gender remit, for example,

> Not much attention is given to violence perpetrated against women in post-disaster phases as it happens during normal times. (Local NGO employee)

Several stated that they did not believe VAW increased or posed a significant additional issue during disasters. For instance,

> I personally believe that there isn't much difference between the violence that occurs during calmer times and during disaster. (INGO employee)

The data certainly show the usefulness of organisations with a pre-established gender remit. Not only are women-focused organisations more likely to understand and appreciate how and when violence will spike, they also build sensitive response mechanisms into their programming. However, not even these organisations necessarily have a clear understanding of the impact of disasters on VAW within households that face minor or no displacement.

Looking more specifically at the impact of engagement with women's organisations, we did find differences between our two field sites which are important to note. The data record a greater willingness among women in Morang to challenge VAW than in Kathmandu, which appears from the interviews to be at least partially a reflection of their engagement with women's organisations in Morang. Certainly, our participants in Morang were more aware of the existence of both women-focused organisations and also of individual ward representatives who were particularly proactive around issues of violence against women. In Kathmandu District, however, response to the earthquake is regarded as poor from a gender perspective; according to our qualitative interviews, although NGOs have provided support with a focus on shelter and food provision, they have not addressed VAW well.[5]

Indeed fewer women's organisations interacting with our study participants in Kathmandu District seem to actively challenge VAW, which may seem odd considering that it includes the capital city and most international organisations have headquarters there. It may of course be an anomaly; we would have to conduct wider research in other Kathmandu communities to confirm this. However, looking at the activities of the organisations that the women in our Kathmandu study engaged with, most focused on giving micro loans to women rather than possessing a specific mandate to advocate against violence. In Morang, the opposite was true. This may help to explain why in Kathmandu, statements such as this were more common than in Morang:

> Nothing can be done in another's matter. The victim has to suffer on her own.

Whereas in Morang, we frequently heard women speak of the support gained through women's groups, including statements like this:

> Mahila Bikas, Aama Samuha (mother's group) plays a very important role in our lives. The voice of the group is heard in comparison to the individual voice. This group provided awareness on violence against women. It also provided financial support through loans.

Informal networks

While women's organisations have clearly had a positive impact on attitudes to VAW in Morang (specifically on women's willingness to challenge it), the importance of peer networks actually presented as stronger in the quantitative data. Given the opportunity to rank the importance of various support sources, women in both districts ranked 'peer networks' higher than 'local organisations', with 78% of the women surveyed highlighting the core importance of female peer networks. However, the qualitative data reveal a significant overlap between the two categories, with many women thinking of local organisations (not INGOs) as peer support because they are run by local women and because the group activities they run are populated by locals too:

> The emergence of women in such [peer] groups occurs in an informal manner. If there is a group of 50 members inside an organisation there are sub groups of like minded women working in an informal way.

To a degree, therefore, the separation of these categories is misleading. However, we have chosen to maintain the distinction here in order to represent the quantitative data and to highlight different issues that may be relevant in future cross-cultural comparisons.

A female ward representative in Morang stated,

> One of the most effective approaches are peer groups because informal groups of women are really strong. The issues that they cannot share with their families they can share with each other and in that group if there is a woman with leadership qualities who is proactive then they can facilitate the involvement of other women. This will strengthen the power of other women and help raise their voices.

In Biratnagar, key female ward representatives are building on these informal structures and networks in a more formal systematic offering safe spaces for women as the yearly flood displacement and ongoing violence continue:

> We formed a forum for women's rights. It is at district level consisting of leaders from women's organisations from each and every group actively providing aid for the people in need. Those organisations and forums counsel the women who were vulnerable and awareness programs were conducted, this kind of important work was done by those groups of women and organisations. If a woman is tortured the protocol is to bring her to a governmental organisation, since the local government has now been provided with the freedom to make legal decisions but they have not been able to execute properly. Basically it is the local women groups who help in reporting the cases and everything else follows.

Conclusions and recommendations

The literature review presented at the start of this article clearly highlighted a gap in research exploring the gendered impact of climate-related disasters. The primary data presented in this article are both timely but also points further to the need for deeper inquiry into the complex ways in which a traumatic climatic event weaves into and further deepens structural inequalities. We know these inequalities trigger and normalise violence against women. We can see in our data that at the individual and household levels, a deepening of stress and tension as a result of disasters. At community level, peer networks emerge in response or adapt to respond to increases in violence. Our data show that at district level if peer networks are also supported by women's organisations and local government, they become even more effective in mitigating violence and also in challenging its daily presence.

Furthermore, there was a clear link between awareness and understanding of how violence increases and impacts on women's lives post-disaster and organisations already engaged in issues surrounding women's rights and gender. Those organisations not focused or pursuing activities in relation to gender tended to report that violence did not increase post displacement but were clear it is always a problem.

What these findings combined tell us is that violence against women must be integrated into all emergency responses when a climatic disaster occurs. Specialist women's organisations and advisors need to be included in those funded to support and mitigate the increase in risk and vulnerabilities we know occurs. A possible approach to this integration may be to systematically embed risk assessment and responses into activities at all stages of response to disasters. As stated at the start of the article, responses move between clusters of activities relating to rescue, relief, rehabilitation and finally reconstruction. Integration of a sensitised VAW lens would need to adapt to the shifts through this response continuum. For example, in the immediate rescue phase temporary shelters must be constructed sensitively ensuring women are not living in close proximity to men from other households and that toilets are gender-segregated and well-lit. During the relief stage, VAW reporting mechanism needs to be in place during on evidence of what works best. The expertise of women's organisations should be drawn on and women from with the affected communities recruited by them as mobilisers reaching out and supporting potentially vulnerable women. Similarly, both the rehabilitation and reconstruction stages need to ensure mechanism for reporting

and support exist as well as process for ongoing risk assessment of likely pressure and trigger points for VAW. For example, a sudden loss of income and a few new work opportunities are known as triggers, a sensitised community led approach should be able to identify which families are most acutely hit. The proposed social mobilisers could work with them to ensure violence is not an outcome of deeper economic insecurity. Similarly, drinking levels of men within a community can also be monitored by community activists and mobilisers supported by a wider enabling environment of organisations linked to local government and the police.

In short, our data and the wider literature we have drawn upon in our analysis, point to the urgent need to recognise increased VAW as an outcome of climate disasters and for an integrated model to be developed and operationalised moving forward.

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Notes

1. Exceptions are Fothergill and Squire, 2018; Regmi, 2016; Standing et al., 2016.
2. This type of power breach by figures in authority has become the focus of intensive scrutiny in very recent years, propelled (at least initially) by the 2018 Oxfam scandal in post-earthquake Haiti.
3. It is based on 45 qualitative interviews and secondary sources.
4. Where there are two rooms, one is usually for living and the other is a small space set aside for food preparation.
5. Standing et al. (2016) explore this in detail and offer some notable exceptions.

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