Wrong conversation

The disaster rhetoric that emphasizes women’s suffering takes away focus from the dynamic role women can play in rebuilding their communities

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In the weeks that followed the April 25 earthquake, dozens of articles made light of the fact that natural disasters, including earthquakes, are usually worse for women. While generally true, this conversation diminishes enough and must be better nuanced. Different women experience disasters differently according to a variety of factors, including geography, age, class, caste, ethnicity, marital status, and position within the household and community.

In framing this disaster rhetoric primarily as “something that happens to women,” it not only boxes women in as categorical victims and robs them of their ability to make purposeful decisions, it also overlooks the vital role that they can play in disaster reconstruction and development.

I visited the villages of Tinpiple and Dapcha in Nuwakot recently to try to understand how local women themselves view the disaster and its aftermath. In many ways, they agreed with what has been circulating in the media—their experience and needs after the earthquake were different than those of men. While men became anxious about how they would continue to earn a livelihood, women focused more on the immediate threat of how they would keep their children safe, prepare the next meal, care for the sick, and clean what needed to be cleaned.

The women, many of whom were still sleeping with their families in tents, also worried about how safe it was for them to go to work. There had been reports of_LIGHTNING strikes
during the night. For many women, being at night or at work was a risk. This was especially true for young, married women going to the hospital saying that they were pregnant, presumably because they had been raped. Another woman had a husband working in Malaysia. He told her that he has other debts to pay off, and that she would have to figure out how to rebuild their damaged house by herself.

While these are all experiences of women, they are not the experiences of all women, and it is important to recognize this distinction. One reason why women were believed to be more impacted by the earthquake was that it was thought they were more likely to be at home when the earthquake struck. However, in this group of women I spoke with, only one out of five women had actually been at home when things began to shake. The other women, many of whom are active members of different community organizations, were busy running errands in nearby towns. This suggests that where women were when the earthquake struck cannot be planned or predicted, but instead depends on a combination of factors such as class and mobility, which can be vastly different among women, even within the same community.

The fact that different women experience disaster differently is true for the post-disaster recovery process as well. Around both Tinpiple and Dapcha, the shifting ground caused some springs to dry up, while others became more plentiful. As a result, some girls and women now have to walk further to find water and spend more time collecting it.

The women who live close to the main road have the potential to rework some of the biggest challenges. One disabled, widowed woman has two daughters of land, but because of the earthquake, the people who farm the land are unable to pay her. After the earthquake, she moved into a tent with another family, but soon, the tent was taken away. She currently has no home, no means of income, and no one to take care of her.

In effect, then, to merely say that women are affected more in disasters can be insufficient when one starts to take into account the heterogeneity that exists within the category of women. When it leaves the potential for relief efforts to focus on women generally, the result is that the women who need help may not receive it.

In the country’s reconstruction process moving forward, it will be necessary to translate this more complicated understanding of women’s circumstances into practice.

Lastly, the disaster rhetoric that emphasizes women’s suffering tends to take away focus from the dynamic role that women have the potential to play in rebuilding their communities. This is in part because women bring a gender-specific perspective to discussions and often have social networks that differ from men, which frequently reach some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

Significantly, the women in Nuwakot did not see themselves as victims, but as individuals who must figure out how to effectively move forward without waiting for the help of outsiders. One woman started laughing as she told the story of how she wanted to be part of the relief effort, to help the people in need. She tied a shawl around her face and went to the roof of a home and helped demolish it. Relief efforts will come and go, but it is clear that these women who ultimately have the task of rebuilding their communities in the years to come.

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