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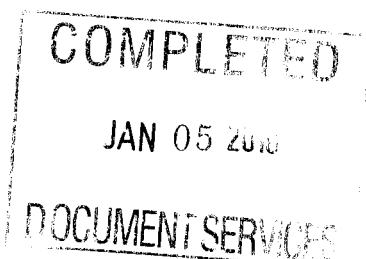
ENGENDERING DISASTERS
Feminization of Response or a Feminization of Responsibility?

Sarah Bradshaw

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, one of the main disasters journals, the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* of the International Sociological Association, published its first special edition dedicated to women and disasters. In 2009, the ten-year anniversary edition marking this event is planned. It will be the only other edition dedicated to gender published during this period. Despite the best efforts of a small group of women dedicated to advancing understanding of the topic, Fordham[1] noted ten years ago that the incorporation of a gender focus into disasters' work has still not advanced much further than revealing the situation of women. Ten years gone, it could be argued that little further advancement has been made, at least in terms of how gender roles, relations, and identities are constructed and re-constructed in the disaster context. What has advanced is the inclusion of women in post-disaster activities. Despite the paucity of research, women have been cast as one of the most vulnerable groups at risk from natural and "man-made' hazards. They are often mentioned in the same breath as children and the elderly, suggesting their vulnerability is due to some inherent characteristic based on their sex and as such common to all women. Rather than tackle the causes of their assumed vulnerability, such as unequal power relations, often the focus is instead on the symptoms of this, especially women's relatively lower access to resources, including economic resources, or their assumed relative poverty.

    The relationship between poverty and disaster has recently become a focus of attention for disasters and development planners, especially in relation to the recognition of the need to "disaster-proof" development. At the same time, the relationship between women and poverty, and notions of gendered experiences of poverty have begun to have an impact on the mainstream development agenda. In Latin America in particular, a key area of research has been around processes of "feminization" associated with poverty and poverty reduction and their implications. This article will explore how the "new" poverty discourse within mainstream development has interacted with the disasters discourse, and its impact on women. More specifically, it will draw on the notion of processes of feminization within the development field and, drawing on experiences from Latin America, specifically Nicaragua, ask how applicable they are to the disasters context and what they mean for advancing gender equality.

THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

Despite the regularity with which they occur, disasters have stubbornly remained outside the mainstream development agenda. In part this is because they are still conceptualized as extraordinary events that break the "normal" routine of everyday life, including the established process of "development". For example, immediately after an event it is not unusual to hear commentators talking of how the disaster has "set back" development by five or more years. Disaster academics have long pointed out that natural hazards are not unusual or even surprise events. As such, "disasters" should be better understood not as interrupting development, but as demonstrating a lack of development or processes of underdevelopment. They represent an outcome of the development to date that has not improved the ability of the population to respond to the natural hazard, and thus avoid the associated potential disaster.[2/] Rather than focus on plans around what to do when a disaster occurs, this latter view suggests a need to mainstream disaster prevention initiatives into development practice. While this view has become accepted over the years, it has yet to be widely translated into mainstream practice. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and associated processes provide a good example of this.

The MDGs now frame all development processes and the funding decisions of the key donors. The key aim is to cut in half, by 2015, the numbers living in poverty and hunger. They also include goals around access to education, health — infant and maternal mortality and epidemics including HIV/AIDS — gender, the environment, and North-South relations. The MDGs do widen the notion of "development" from the narrow economic growth focus of the international financial institutions (IFIs); however, they also represent a narrowing of the agendas that emerged from the UN conferences of the 1990s with some central agreements being notable by their absence. Notable absentees from the goals include women's reproductive and sexual health and rights concerning gender-based violence and sexualities, and disasters, conflict, and war. For example, the agreements under the Yokohama Strategy of 1995 are not included and there is no specific goal to reduce disasters or disaster losses.

The *Millennium Declaration*, the document on which the process is based, did recognize the risks to development of disasters and resolved to intensify collective efforts to reduce the number and effects of natural and human-made disasters. However, in the move from the Declaration to the Development Goals this resolution is lost. The equivalent global agenda for disaster reduction, the *Hyogo Framework for Action* (*HFA*), suggests disaster risk reduction (DRR) is an important element for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, "including those contained in the *Millennium Declaration*". Calling on the Declaration is presumably to suggest that disaster response is implicit or underpins the Millennium Development process despite its absence from the Goals. More generally, the discourse around the need to include disasters within development initiatives draws on the links between disasters and poverty and how disasters can undermine advances in poverty reduction. The Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction (2009), a partnership between the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) and the World Bank, and aimed at mainstreaming disaster resilience into poverty reduction, notes there is "ample evidence" that poverty is the most important trigger which turns hazards into disasters. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) discourse justifying the call to "disaster-proof" development highlights that disasters "set

back poverty reduction" given that the poor are the least able to recover and rebuild live-lihoods. It also makes the gender-poverty-disaster link, noting that female-headed house-holds "have been found to be among the most affected by natural disasters".[3/]

THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY AND POVERTY REDUCTION PROCESSES

The link between gender and poverty has been much contested in recent years. The notion of a "feminization of poverty" acquired something of its current status as a global "ortho-doxy" in 1995 when the eradication of the "persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women" was adopted within the *Beijing Platform for Action*.[4/] Feminization of the poverty thesis has over time come to be equated with more women being poor and more women being among the poor, that this is a rising trend, and that it is related to a femini-zation of household headship. Underpinning this is the notion of women heads as being the poorest of the poor. However, while these ideas appear to have become received wis-dom there is little research from Latin America or any other region to support women's relative income poverty to be at the suggested scale and to be increasing over time. Re-search also fails to confirm any consistent linkage between the "feminization of poverty" and the "feminization of household headship".[5/] Jackson[6/] called for a move to "rescue" gender from this "poverty trap," noting the dangers of equating gender and poverty may mean that policies to address poverty are assumed to automatically address gender inequal-ity or are implemented in the name of women and gender equality. This may help to ex-plain why the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN/ECLAC)[7/] found that the percentage of women participating in poverty reduction pro-grammes in the region was actually much higher than the percentage of women identified as poor. This high "participation" of women in poverty reduction programmes has led some to suggest that, rather than the feminization of poverty, we should talk of the "fem-inization of poverty alleviation,"[8/] whereby women are being constructed not as the most poor, but as the most efficient means by which to reduce the number of poor. Condi-tional cash transfer (CCT) programmes, pioneered in Mexico and Brazil, provide a good example of this trend. Perhaps best known, not least since the World Bank has used it as a model for programmes across the globe, is Mexico's *Progresa* (later renamed as *Opor-tunidades*) programme.[9/]

The programme aims to alleviate short-term poverty through cash transfers to poor households and to reduce longer-term poverty through conditioning these transfers on household investment in the human capital of their children. Backed by World Bank research that highlights the efficiency gains from channelling resources through women, it is women who receive the transfers on the condition that health, education, and nutrition targets have been met. Women beneficiaries must also attend training sessions and, in some cases, undertake community works. In the *Progresa* programme, families also re-ceive extra monetary incentives for sending girls to school and keeping them there. How-ever, not all programmes have included this element, the Nicaraguan programme being a case in point.[10/] The authors of CCT programmes often claim more than material improve-ment from the programmes and point to wider empowerment aims, generally the improve-ment in the situation and position of women and girls. Others highlight that far from

being "empowering," the programmes seek to define the identity of women as being focused on mothering as well as what it means to be a "good" mother.

   While those who promote CCTs claim great success for the programmes across the globe, doubts have been raised over the key elements of the initiatives, not least the need for conditionalities.[11] There are also doubts over their general applicability — the suggestion being the policies work best in middle-income rather than poor countries[12] — and their long-term effectiveness. The key aim of the programmes is not poverty reduction per se, but to change the behaviour of the poor to reduce their own poverty in the future, via punitive conditionalities that remove funding if the poor do not comply. The fact women have been targeted as the "beneficiaries" of cash transfers with the responsibility for ensuring the related conditions/behaviour changes are met has led some to suggest that women are at the service of the "new" poverty agenda rather than served by it.[13] That is, we have moved from an era of the "feminization of poverty" to one of the "feminization of poverty alleviation," and a resultant "feminization of responsibility and obligation" where women are assuming greater liability for dealing with poverty and have progressively less choice other than to do so.[14] While women are expected to take on new roles, these are conceptualized as part of their existing gendered roles as mothers and carers, and thus reinforce gendered divisions of labour and do little to change the situation and position of women.[15]

   The notion of processes of "feminization" within development is an interesting one, and one that might usefully be used to explore ongoing processes to "engender" disasters.

ENGENDERING DISASTERS: THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

Nicaragua provides an interesting case study to explore ideas of engendering and feminizing the development and disaster processes. It is the poorest country in the region and since 2000 has been a "veritable laboratory" for anti-poverty strategies,[16] including a World Bank-backed CCT programme. It is also prone to disasters, both "natural" and political, the last large national level event being Hurricane Mitch in 1998. This will provide the context for the discussion.

   As noted above, the focus on women within vulnerability may support the feminization argument and there does appear to be a "feminization of risk" related to the fact that women are increasingly being seen as a vulnerable group. This would suggest a "feminization of impact" should be apparent or form the basis of this understanding, with women having increasingly suffered a greater impact over time. After most events, there is no reliable data to suggest that women more than men suffered physical damage or injury, nor that more men, or women, were killed. The "tyranny of the urgent" often means that basic information like the sex of the injured or even deceased is still not recorded, especially when bodies are burnt where they lie to stop the spread of disease. Without reliable data, all notions of who is most impacted is really based on assumptions of who will be most impacted. It is interesting that predictions tend to be drawn from models of poverty and vulnerability, yet the role of individual response, or how each individual responds, to an actual event is less well explored. Response is subjective and while it may be framed by access to resources, it is also based on individual understandings of appropriate behav-

iour. As such cultural norms, including gender norms, may have an important influence. The Indian Ocean Tsunami clearly illustrated how gender norms may limit women's ability to respond, for example, and indeed create a "feminized risk". Conversely, within Latino cultures the cult of "machismo" may make men, not women, more likely to suffer loss of life due to their socially constructed roles and associated riskier behaviour patterns in the face of danger. On the other hand, women's social conditioning may make them so risk adverse that this becomes a risk in itself as they remain in their homes despite rising water levels, waiting for a male authority figure to arrive to grant them permission and/or assist them in leaving.

It is also difficult to argue that women, more than men, suffer material damage once again, not least since reliable data tends not to exist. Post-disaster measures tend not to look inside households at individual loss, and this means that differences between the genders are actually differences between households or by sex of head. However, there is evidence to suggest that it is assumed that women will be equally hit, if not more so than men, especially female heads of household. Hurricane Mitch provides a good example of this. While concerns in the past have been expressed about women being excluded from relief and reconstruction initiatives, Mitch suggests that this lesson has been learnt and the high levels of female participation in reconstruction are relatively well documented, as are the issues this participation raises.[17] Post-Mitch research also highlighted that each woman will have her own subjective experience of a disaster/post-disaster that cannot be generalized, and that the same event may be both positively and negatively understood by women over time and space.[18] One lesson to be drawn from this is the need to examine carefully the varied understandings of the events "disasters" set in process and how they may impact not just on women's practical life, but also gendered identities of what it means to be a woman.

In practical terms, post-Mitch reconstruction targeted resources at women but often these were, as with poverty reduction programmes, actually resources for other members of the household. One study found that while over half the women felt it was women who were participating most in reconstruction, only a quarter felt women benefited most.[19] How women valued these practical resources may also be important in terms of how they see themselves. There is evidence to suggest that it is not just the amount received but the source of income that helps to determine the value it is given within a household which, in turn, helps determine relative voice. In-kind resources are valued less than cash, particularly by men and by heads of household, as are resources gained through activities other than those deemed to be "work". If women are in receipt of in-kind resources through participation in projects rather than cash via work, this may adversely affect their decision-making ability in the home which, in turn, may have a negative impact on well-being and poverty.[20] Even when women were targeted directly as people rather than mothers, the focus remained on the practical, not more "strategic," interests of women. For example, women heads of household in particular were targeted for resources and one study found higher proportions of female- than male-headed households received help with housing.[21] However, while female heads "participated" more in material terms as beneficiaries of housing projects, the study found fewer female than male heads felt that their opinion had been taken into account about where to build the new housing, and even fewer in terms of how to build new housing.

The examples above raise the question of why women were targeted for reconstruction post-Mitch. Was it due to assumptions around impact related, in turn, to generalizations around women's relative poverty and vulnerability? Or was it, for other reasons, less related to women's situation and more related to women's position as mothers, carers, and efficient resource providers? A further question relates to who was, and is, targeting women.

To the extent to which reconstruction did occur post-Mitch, it occurred via organized civil society, including national as well as international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as women's groups and movements. This may help to explain the focus on women as these actors, especially international NGOs, feel obliged to ensure a strong gender perspective to their work. To ensure this, international NGOs tend to seek gendered partners in the country in order to gain access to women's voices around needs. However, rather than seek out the diverse voices of women's groups and women's movements, the "tyranny of the urgent" may mean post-disaster a quicker route is sought. It was suggested that international NGOs targeted gendered national NGOs as "the voice" of the movement and a more accessible, given their legal status, funding option.[22] This apparently unbalanced focus of funding on women's NGOs further fueled debates over the perceived negative impact of the so-called "NGO"isation" of women's movements,[23] and helps explain why post-Mitch was a time of disunity as much as unity among gendered actors in civil society. The fault lines for these cleavages were varied, some old and some new, but many related to the role women's organizations should play and how they should play it, at the national, local, and community levels.

Women were among the first to respond post-Mitch and individual women, NGOs, and women's movements assumed the responsibility for reconstruction as their own. At the macro level, some women's groups and movements chose not to join the newly founded civil society national coordinating body, the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER), fearing their voice would not be heard within a mixed (male/female) space, and instead preferring to make their own demands and set their own agendas, separately. Others became highly active in the CCER taking on leadership roles as well as responsibility, not only to engender the space, but also to mainstream issues such as violence and psychosocial impact into all activities. At a local level too, women's groups were active and found themselves having to fight to get their voices heard, and put gender onto the local reconstruction agenda. These "political" actions were complemented by practical actions, with women's groups taking on the commitment of rebuilding homes and lives and of caring for those affected, both physically and mentally. At all levels, women took on the gender stereotypical "caring" roles that many individually and collectively had been, and continue, working to challenge.

A number of women reflecting on the processes post-Mitch noted how their learnt "feminist" responses appear to have been overruled by socialized gendered roles immediately after the event.[24] These stereotypical caring roles were further reinforced by the reconstruction process as the responsibility for engendering reconstruction was not only assumed by women, but may be seen to have become understood to be the responsibility of women, as donors and international agencies sought to ensure a "gender perspective" in their work and, to this end, sought out women's groups and organizations. This may suggest a "feminization of disaster response" is apparent, a phenomenon also noted in post-tsunami Sri-Lanka.[25] However, while these feminized roles of responding to an event

and caring for those who survive were clear immediately after the event, it appears they were not sustained over the longer term and no associated "feminization of mitigation" is apparent. Indeed over the years, many of the women's groups active after Mitch have retreated from the "disaster"-related spaces they occupied, including the CCER. The CCER is a good example of this trend and of what might explain this trend.

Women were a driving force behind the CCER's proposal for reconstruction and key in ensuring the people-centred vision it presented. The focus was clearly on addressing vulnerabilities and tackling the root causes of these, most notably unequal power relations at all levels. Ten years on and there is a very different approach to disasters in today's Civil Coordinator. Having dropped the "Emergency and Reconstruction" element of its name, the CC still has a disaster-focused group. Its name — the "risk management group" — helps demonstrate the change in focus and may also help to explain the absence now of many women initially active in the group. This example demonstrates a wider trend in that there are competing disaster discourses — the discourse of reconstruction which is social science-based, focused on vulnerability and holistic in its approach, and the discourse of mitigation which maintains a natural science approach, is hazard focused and oriented toward managing risk. This latter approach, as exemplified by the *HFA*, has little place for gender other than recognizing a feminized vulnerability may exist but seeing the solution to lie in managing risk. Hence, while new spaces exist to engage with disaster reduction and have been strengthened in the last ten years, they are largely un-gendered and, in fact, may demonstrate processes of de-feminization rather than feminization as the move to risk management many see gender activists active in post-reconstruction efforts withdraw from the disaster field.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: FEMINIZATION OF RESPONSE OR FEMINIZATION OF RESPONSIBILITY?

Over time, there does appear to have been a "feminization of risk" as women have been increasingly constructed as a vulnerable group in the face of natural hazards. This is not based on any objective feminized impact since the data does not exist to support claims that women, more than men, suffer loss of life and limb and, particularly in Latin America, the opposite might be true given men's socially prescribed riskier behaviour in the face of danger. While it may relate to a feminized impact in terms of loss of material goods, again it is questionable as to the extent that this can be asserted with any certainty. Gender disaggregated data still tend to differentiate not between men and women within households, but instead record household loss, and thus reflect only differences between male- and female-headed households. Again, while female heads may suffer greater losses, what may actually influence this feminized notion of risk is not so much the actual situation but perceptions of the relative situation of female heads of household and, in particular, their assumed greater vulnerability.

This assumed vulnerability appears important in understanding apparent patterns of feminization of response/reconstruction. Hurricane Mitch clearly demonstrates how women were key "beneficiaries" of reconstruction and actively sought out by NGOs and other agencies to be central to the organized response. What is questionable is the reason for this focus on women. It may be due to a gender perspective which seeks to use the

hypothesized "window of opportunity" to address gender inequalities through projects that challenge gender stereotypical roles and aim to address women's strategic interests as well as practical needs. However, again there is little evidence of such holistic projects and even less documenting the success of these. Even when potentially productive assets are provided or material resources given in exchange for women's "participation," these resources may be little valued in the household compared to monetary resources earned through "work" even when the latter have a lesser economic value. This effectively reduces women's voice in the household and may have an adverse impact on their position and well-being. However, the focus on women post-disaster may not be so much driven by concerns around gender inequality but rather by gendered roles and relations. That is, as with the CCT programmes now popular across the globe, projects target resources at women because they see women as the best means to ensure a fair distribution of those resources within households. The focus then, even when productive assets are provided, is on women as mothers and as such, as the more efficient providers to others, suggesting women to be at the service of, rather than served by, reconstruction. Thus, rather than a feminization of reconstruction/response, this might be better read as an element of a wider feminization process — that of the feminization of responsibility. This does not only occur at the micro or community level among individual women, but is also apparent at the meso level among "organized women" who work within gendered NGOs, and women's groups and movements. Organized women fall victim to this as, despite all we know about social construction of roles and responsibilities and the need to challenge these, post-disaster finds us unprepared and unsure of how to respond in a non-gender stereotypical way, without assuming the role of carer and reinforcing the notion of a feminized responsibility to care.

NOTES

1/   M. Fordam, "Making Women Visible in Disasters: Problematising the Private Domain," *Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management* 22 (2:1998):127.

2/   See M. Anderson and P. Woodrow, *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*, 2nd ed. (London: IT Press, 1999); J. Lewis, *Development in Disaster-prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999); and B. Wisner, P. Blaikie, T. Cannon, and I. Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

3/   Department for International Development (DFID), "Adaption to Climate Change: Making Development Disaster Proof" (Key Sheet 6) (London: DFID, 2004), p. 3.

4/   S. Chant, "Towards a (Re)-conceptualisation of the 'Feminisation of Poverty': Reflections on Gender-differentiated Poverty from The Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica" in S. Chant, ed., *International Handbook on Gender and Poverty* (Cheltenham/Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar, forthcoming).

5/   Sylvia Chant, *Gender, Generation and Poverty: Exploring the 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Cheltenham/Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar, 2007).

6/   C. Jackson, "Rescuing Gender from the Poverty Trap" in Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson, eds., *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

7/   UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN/ECLAC), "Roads Towards Gender Equity in Latin America and the Caribbean" (Paper prepared for the 9th Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, Mexico City, Mexico, 10-12 June 2004) (UN/ECLAC, 2004).

8/   Chant, "Towards a (Re)-conceptualisation of the 'Feminisation of Poverty'."

9/   M. Molyneux, "Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: Progresa/Oprtunidades, Mexico's Conditional Transfer Programme," *Social Policy and Administration* 40 (4:2006):425-49; and his, "Two

Cheers for CCTs," *IDS Bulletin* 38 (3:2007):69-74.

10/ Sarah Bradshaw, "From Structural Adjustment to Social Adjustment: A Gendered Analysis of Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes in Mexico and Nicaragua," *Global Social Policy* 8 (1:2008):188-207; and S. Bradshaw and A. Quiros Viquez, "Women Beneficiaries or Women Bearing the Cost? A Gendered Analysis of the Red de Proteccion Social in Nicaragua," *Development and Change* 39 (5:2008):823-44.

11/ E. Hooper, "Social Protection and Human Security" (Paper presented at the 3rd International Congress of Human Resource Development, Islamabad, November 2006).

12/ Rawlings, "A New Approach to Social Assistance: Latin America's Experience with Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes" (World Bank Social Safety Nets Primer Notes 15) (2004).

13/ Molyneux, "Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda."

14/ S. Chant, "Re-thinking the 'Feminisation of Poverty' in Relation to Aggregate Gender Indices," *Journal of Human Development* 7 (2:2006):201-20; and her, "The 'Feminisation of Poverty' and the 'Feminisation' of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision?" *Journal of Development Studies* 44 (2:2008): 165-97.

15/ Molyneux, "Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda"; and "Two Cheers for CCTs."

16/ S. Wiggins, "Poverty Reduction Strategy Review, Country Case: Nicaragua, April 2007" (Background paper for the Chronic Poverty Report 2008-2009, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2008).

17/ Sarah Bradshaw, *Relaciones Peligrosas: Mujeres, Hombres y el Mitch* (*Dangerous Liaisons: Women, Men and Hurricane Mitch*) (Managua, Nicaragua: Puntos de Encuentro, 2001); her, "Reconstructing Roles and Relations: Women's Participation in Reconstruction in Post-Mitch Nicaragua," *Gender and Development* 9 (3:2001):79-87; and her, "Exploring the Gender Dimensions of Reconstruction Processes Post-Hurricane Mitch," *Journal of International Development* 14 (2002):871-79; J. Cupples, "Gender and Hurricane Mitch: Reconstructing Subjectivities after Disasters," *The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management* 31 (2:2007):155-75; and P. Delaney and E. Shrader, "Gender and Post-Disaster Reconstruction: The Case of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua" (Decision review draft presented to the World Bank, January 2000).

18/ Cupples, "Gender and Hurricane Mitch."

19/ Bradshaw, *Relaciones Peligrosas.*

20/ Bradshaw, "Reconstructing Roles and Relations"; and her, "Exploring the Gender Dimensions."

21/ Centro de Investigación de Enfermedades Tropicales/Coordinadora Civil para le Emergencia y la Reconstrucción (Tropical Disease Research Centre/Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction) (CIET/CCER), *Auditoria Social para la Emergencia y la Reconstruccion — Fase 2* (*Emergency and Reconstruction Social Audit — Phase 2*) (Managua, Nicaragua: Carqui Press, 1999).

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23/ S. Alvarez, "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO "Boom," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1 (2:1999):181-209.

24/ S. Bradshaw, "On the Margins and the Mainstream: Engendering the Disasters Agenda" (Gender Equality and Disaster Risk Reduction Workshop, Honolulu, Hawaii, 10-12 August 2004).

25/ L. Overton, "Flirting with Disaster: Gendered Impacts of Women's Access to Land and Housing in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka" (Undergraduate thesis, Middlesex University, August 2007). (Unpublished)

COMMENT

Cheryl L. Anderson

Sarah Bradshaw's article questions the current discourse on gender in disaster manage-
ment. From her perspective and field work experience in Latin America, the focus on
gender during disaster response has been strong; however, it has resulted in placing in-
creasing burden and responsibility on women. Rather than creating greater gender equal-
ity in disaster, programmes have attended to women's needs and shifted the analysis to
appear as if there is greater gender equality. The article seems to stem from the frustration
that over a decade of gender research in disasters has failed to actually change gender
equity in practice beyond rhetoric and language in disaster policies.

Bradshaw adeptly targets disaster discourse that has successfully cast women as the
most "vulnerable" to disasters. The attention on vulnerability links it with development
issues through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which intend to reduce glo-
bal poverty. Bradshaw examines the discourse of MDG goals in relation to the feminiza-
tion of poverty that has led to a programmatic shift to dealing with poverty by providing
resources to women. The programmes are then viewed as successes because they have
focused on needs for women. In reality, these programmes place an added burden or
responsibility on women for attaining global poverty reduction goals. This "feminization
of responsibility" holds true for development programmes, and more specifically, for dis-
aster management.

Embedded in Bradshaw's argument are fundamental differences between discourse
and policy development and the actualization and implementation of programmes in the
field. Experiences in Latin America demonstrate accomplishment in addressing gender
issues during post-disaster response and recovery following Hurricane Mitch. In the more
recent risk reduction focus, policies and programmes seem unable to achieve similar re-
sults with attention to gender. There may be regional differences in effect in programme
implementation however, and while Latin America has had success in gender programmes
for disaster response, other regions may have implemented risk reduction programmes
that are gender responsive, especially in areas of community-based environmental man-
agement. The dichotomy may be less about the discourse of disaster response versus
hazard mitigation, and more about the separation of discourse and policy development
from implementation in the field.

The article cautions us to think about the ways in which we analyse and use gender
in programming. By framing the problem as one of "vulnerability," the programmes
constructed to address these problems are those of poverty reduction. This construction
serves to support the functions of the system, or bureaucracy, designed to alleviate pov-

erty. Even though poverty alleviation and development programmes are well-intended, the positive outcomes may often be lost in the organizational structures designed to implement these programmes. The framework rooted in "vulnerability" does not capture the abilities and capacities of people to cope with crises or adapt to changes. Instead, it focuses on problems facing women, and may serve to further marginalize women in the arena of disaster management and development. Rather than using a gender approach that understands problems of women and men, the "feminization of poverty" leads to programmes solely targeting women as a homogenous, "vulnerable" group.

A shift in the focus from "vulnerability" to "adaptive capacity" and "resilience" may highlight areas where programmes could more effectively target resources. To date, case studies and documentation detailing the support of best practices and positive actions of women and men in the field have been scarce. It is not easy to quantify the results of hazard mitigation activities that are daily good practices, and therefore prevent disasters. These are the areas where women and men can recover livelihoods faster in the post-disaster context, and where care should be taken in recovery and rehabilitation from disaster to prevent disruption of activities that work.

Gender approaches in a post-disaster, however, may not result in gender equality. If the approaches are used to understand livelihoods and support recovery, then post-disaster programmes will try to bring society back to the state prior to the disaster. Since the status of men and women generally fails to be equal, the disaster programmes may recover to the same state. Even when programmes are introduced to affect equity, they are not sustained over time because the political, legal, economic, and institutional structures that cause inequality often still remain.

In the end, questions remain about ways to move forward that can achieve gender equality in disasters and in development. Just because attention to women's issues or to gender appears in the policy documentation or programme development does not mean that the application of the programmes will be gender sensitive. There should be more consideration about overall consequences of implementation, because the desired intent is not to place more burden on women or to assign increased responsibility for the successes or failures of disaster programmes.